

Historical Subtitling in the Chinese Context A Case Study of Archaisms

Yilei Yuan
Zhejiang International Studies University

Received: 28/04/2018
Accepted: 05/07/2018

Abstract

Historical films in China often contain an obsolete speech register, a major feature of which is archaism. This paper aims to explore historical subtitling in the Chinese context with a case study on archaisms. A close observation of the archaisms in three of Zhang Yimou's films results in a categorisation of four main types of them: nouns, idioms, adverbs and four-character phrases. By comparing the literal translations of the source dialogue and the English subtitles, this study analyses the strategies that the subtitlers have employed in the subtitle rendition. It is found that simplification, modernisation, explicitation and reformulation are often involved in subtitling the archaisms. This paper also includes a section on the visual representation of historicity. It is suggested that history-based vocabularies should be modernised and simplified, although a formal register of subtitling is essential in maintaining the narrative difference of a historical film from one that is set in modern times.

Key Words

History, Subtitling, Archaism, Visuality.



Introduction

According to Monk (2002: 177), '...films and television dramatisations set in the past form an established, enduringly popular and reliably exportable strand of British moving-image culture'. Similarly, some film and TV productions set in ancient China that are highly popular within China have been exported too. History, as a narrative retelling the past, is now perceived as a structuring of

the temporal which negotiates with the anxieties and desires of the present (Muraleedharan, 2002: 144). Zhang Yimou's films, which to some extent juxtapose the past with the present, also inescapably involve a social-historical background. At the beginning of the 21st century, Zhang directed three martial arts films in a row, *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), depicting China in ancient times. Although the plots of all three films date from different dynasties, the speech register is similar in creating the archaic and literary effect. Dialogue in Chinese film productions set in centuries ago generally adopts an obsolete style to imply historicity, in spite of the difference between the linguistics of different historical periods.

However, despite specific linguistic features of ancient Chinese, dialogue of these films can generally be deemed as modern. It might even be safe to say that film dialogue does not reveal the authentic Chinese speech of the era a film portrays. The reason is that ancient Chinese, which requires intensive learning for a modern Chinese audience to understand, is much briefer than the modern version (Li, 2007: 1), although the writing system is largely consistent throughout history. Compared to the moderately historical speech in Zhang's films, the past in *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) and *Juanrez* (William Dieterle, 1939) turns into an allegory of the present where the historical topic is presented in the guise of a modern speech treatment (Stubbs, 2013: 42). Therefore, it seems that film dialogue can hardly be genuinely historical, which makes the responsibility of conveying historicity fall on non-verbal channels. According to Stubbs (*ibid.*: 41), in many historical films, the past is embodied by ample realistic and visible details rather than by 'social relations, ideology or other essentially invisible forces'. For instance, the conspicuously obsolescent costumes in Zhang's three aforementioned films. *Hero* also imitates architecture of the Kingdom of Qin, not to mention the ancient battlefields as well as chariots that showcase transport from over 2,000 years ago. Considering visual presentation, it is precisely the authentic and approximately 'gratuitous' details which almost pass unnoticed that will confirm the historical reality of the image (Bann, 1984: 57). Music in these films is not to be disregarded either; archaic instruments and melodies are noticeably distinctive for average Chinese audiences. Foreign spectators that are fairly familiar with traditional Chinese music might find it easier to identify the classic effect too.

Discussion of historical films often revolves around their analogy or relevance to the present or their accuracy (Craig, 1991: 12; Rosenstone, 2001; McKechnie, 2002: 220; Stubbs, 2013). In spite of the 'accuracy debate' on the

representation of historical truth, the key to convince audiences to trust the 'historical truth' appears to rely on reproducing accurately the look of the period portrayed (McKechnie, 2002: 218), which depends highly on visuality and aesthetics. However, how dialogue and on-screen texts contribute to historical reality has been more or less ignored. Archaisms have been researched in the literary realm, but archaisms in subtitling, especially the subtitling of Chinese archaic words, may have been neglected. A close observation of the archaisms in the three films leads to the categorisation of them into four types: nouns, idioms, adverbs and four-character phrases. Nouns are inescapably a primary mark of archaism, as many items are apt to have distinct names between past and present, such as places, professions, officials' titles, family members, etc. What was common in the past can be rare at present, for instance, certain literary genres. Idioms, most of which originated from classics of the past, also signifies a literary and outdated register. Without substantial meaning, adverbs can still constitute evident archaisms, especially when they indicate the past tense. Four-character phrases that constantly appear in literary contexts are also symbols of antiquity. This study will provide archaisms in the source language dialogue, its literal translation and the corresponding English subtitles. By comparing literal translations and English subtitles, this study will analyse a variety of strategies that the subtitlers have adopted and explore what archaic specificities subtitle readers might miss after subtitles are translated.

Hero is a story of an assassin named 'Nameless' who plots to assassinate the King of the Kingdom of Qin (221-270BC). However, when he finally faces the King and attains a chance to kill him, he becomes uncertain about whether to proceed or not. The story in *House of Flying Daggers* is set in 813AD in the midst of the Tang Dynasty. It is a love story entangled in the conflicts between the corrupt government and an anti-governmental organisation. *Curse of the Golden Flower* tells of the cruelty and conflicts of a royal family in 928AD during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. The emperor treats the empress poorly who can bear no more and decides to usurp him.

One of the most observable feature of obsolete speech register in films set in ancient China is outdated vocabulary. Archaism is defined as 'in RHETHORIC, literary criticism, and PHILOLOGY, a style that reflects the usage of an earlier period (*literary archaism*) and an out-of-date or old-fashioned word or phrase (*a lexical archaism*)' (McArthur and McArthur, 2005: 162) (original capitalisation and italics). Literary archaism appears when a style imitates older works in order to revive earlier practices or produce a desired

effect (*ibid.*), which archaisms in film subtitles fall into. Venuti (1996: 97) determines that archaism would be useful in indicating the temporal remoteness of the source language texts, their emergence in a different cultural situation at a different historical moment. In translation, especially literary translation, obsolescent language is translated deliberately with an archaising strategy with the purpose of recreating the archaic feature of the text that seems to date from years ago (Leighton, 1991: 52; Steiner, 1992: 366; Lefere, 1994, cited in Jones and Turner, 2004; Jones and Turner, 2004: 59-65). A translator may even turn out a target text with the language of the same historical period as the original which can be unintelligible for modern, target-language, native speakers (Steiner, 1992: 366). That is named 'time-matched archaisation' (Jones and Turner, 2004: 163). At one extreme, that of 'hyperarchaisation', the translator forms older than those which the source writer's target-language contemporaries would have used (Lefere, 1994, cited in Jones and Turner, 2004: 163). The advantage of archaisation is to give the illusion that the translation is firmly rooted in the target language culture (Steiner, 1992: 366). Nevertheless, the translator risks producing an inconsistent archaising translation that is a hybrid of both archaisms and contemporary usages (*ibid.*). In recent English-reading world, archaisation in religious translation can be seen as integrating the text into a liturgical tradition, while archaisation in poetry translation tends to be seen as hackneyed 'Victorian' translationese rather than as signaling the source text's specific historicity (Jones and Turner, 2004: 159).

When the time gap between the production of a source text and its translation becomes so wide that the source text appears markedly past to readers in terms of language, content or both, translators are required to decide how to handle this gap in their translations (Jones and Turner, 2004: 159). Translators' decisions often fall into two categories, archaising (archaisation) or modernising (modernisation) (*ibid.*; Lefere, 1994, cited in *ibid.*). Modernising translations turn older works to the taste of our time, but the taste of our time may or may not prove durable (Leighton, 1991: 55). Certainly they are not likely to survive the test of time that classical works have undergone to earn precisely the approval we lend with the word 'classical' (*ibid.*). As Venuti (1998) puts it, publishers aspiring to bestselling translations are inclined to insist on fluent translations that produce the illusory effect of transparency or seeming untranslated. Therefore, archaism along with other linguistic effect that calls attention to the words as words need to be eschewed (*ibid.*). Film producers and other parties who can be powerful interference in subtitling, play a similar

role to publishers, given that target language subtitles often need to avoid linguistic ‘peculiarities’ for subtitle readers in order to produce the ‘bestselling’ subtitle translation. Hence they might become a driving force for a film to lose its archaism. Archaism in film dialogue and other filmic texts takes up an odd position. Not only is it an indisputable evidence of historicity for a film *per se*, but it may have become a challenge for translators in their decision-making and an obstruction on the film’s international journey of promotion. Strategies, such as hyperarchaisation and time-matched archaisation, applicable in literary translation with the sheer creativity nature, are less than acceptable in subtitling. Not that subtitling is not a creative act, but limitations are different from those in literary translation and shackles may even be more unbearable.

1. Nouns

One of the most common types of archaisms is nouns. *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* all demonstrate an abundance of nouns, including obsolete government official titles and venue names. However, the obsolescence of nouns may be assumed to be insignificant to the plot in the translator’s decision-making which is frequently interfered by various parties involved in the subtitling procedure, as far as foreign viewers are concerned. They are commonly simplified and modernised, so space will be saved and the general meaning conveyed. Baker (1993) defines *simplification* as one of the four translation universals, which means translators’ tendency to produce texts that are simpler and easier to follow. On the other hand, *modernisation*, which is to alter archaic features of words, expressions or sentence patterns and replace them with modern counterparts, enables the smooth transfer of the source archaisms to target language which renders the correspondent target version instantly accessible. Lefere (1994, cited in Jones and Turner, 2004: 164) defines minimal modernisation as ‘modernisation exclusivement linguistique’. The target language version in this strategy may also be seen as not debarring pre-modern reference (Jones and Turner, 2004: 164). Furthermore, references in Lefere’s violent modernisation tie the target text to a specific modern-day time-period, thus stressing its relevance to the time of translating at the expense of its historicity (*ibid.*). Although simplification and modernisation have reduced antiquity, the meaning of most references can still be translated rather than simply omitted. The modernising strategy in the following analyses refers to one similar to Lefere’s minimal modernisation.

House of Flying Daggers begins with Mei, top dancer of an entertainment place in Chang'an (now Xi'an, capital of the Tang Dynasty). She is rumoured to be the blind daughter of the late leader of House of Flying Daggers, a Robin Hood-type of organisation, and thus police captain Jin goes to the venue in Example (1) to investigate this suspicious dancer:

(1)

SL	牡丹坊·舞伎馆
Literal translation	Peony <i>Fang</i> Dancer <i>Guan</i>
TL	Entertainment House Peony Pavilion

‘牡丹’ is peony; ‘坊’ (fāng) used to be a venue of the governmental musical organisation (Zuo, 2007). ‘舞伎’ refers to a professional dancer and performer in the old times. One of the meanings of 馆 was a cultural organisation or venue, as in Gong Zizhen’s (1792-1841) essay ‘My Plum Tree Infirmary’ (病梅馆记). The main character Mei performs two major dances in this venue. 舞伎, 坊 and 馆 as the venues in the film are all archaisms no longer common nowadays. They have all been modernised in the English subtitle. Also, ‘entertainment’ in the translation appears to be vaguer than the source. ‘Peony Dancer Pavilion’ that combines 牡丹坊 and 舞伎馆 may be more explicit and informative.

In *Hero*, Sky, one of the deadliest assassins from the Kingdom of Zhao, appears in an area of the Kingdom of Qin governed by the protagonist assassin Nameless. Sky defeats the Qin fighters and is about to leave, before being stopped by Nameless. At that time, Nameless, who is a man born in Zhao and bears grudge against the Qin army, is still disguised as a lowly official of Qin. Example (2) is Sky’s response upon seeing Nameless:

(2)

SL	小小亭长 有何贵干?
Literal translation	Small village head, what do you want?
TL	The local Prefect. What can I do for you?

Nameless' title '亭长' is equal to a village head nowadays in China. In the Qin and Han Dynasties, 亭长 was in charge of ten square *li* which is a traditional Chinese measurement and which equals 500 metres (Zhao, 2008). Hence, the title was of a very low rank. In China, like in some other cultures, titles are often used as address terms, which is called 'Address Maxim' in Chinese polite phenomenon (Gu, 1990: 248). This means to 'address your interlocutor with an appropriate term' based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth (ibid.). Sardonicly, Sky refers to Nameless as 小小亭长, which means 'small village head'. We might say 小小 (small) has been simplified in the English subtitle. 贵干, an honorific that refers to the 'favour' the speaker expects the interlocutor to ask or the matter to elaborate, contradicts 小小 and further emphasises Sky's insolence. The title in the TL rendition is very reasonable, but the second part is too polite, since Sky's arrogance is ignored. Even though Sky's indifferent and arrogant expression is practically unmistakable for subtitle readers, it might still be better to keep his attitude in the English subtitle.

In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the emperor has a loyal doctor who looks after him and keeps his long-lasting ailment under control. He decides to raise Doctor Jiang's court rank and awards him with a deployment in a town. The empress's maid Jiang Chan follows her father to his new deployment, while her lover Prince Wan visits her secretly. She innocently informs him in Example (3) of an extremely critical matter that suggests the empress's plan to usurp the emperor:

(3)

SL	王后让陈公公交给吴侍郎
Literal translation	The Empress made Eunuch Chen give (them) to Deputy Minister Wu.
TL	Her Majesty had them all delivered to General Wu.

'Them' implies embroidered chrysanthemums, i.e. the 'golden flower' in the film title. When the empress attempts to dethrone the emperor, whoever wears this flower in the coup is on the empress's side and will be pardoned. 'General' is rendered from the official title '侍郎' or deputy minister, whereas a minister is '尚书' (Dong and Jing, 2013: 141). This title applied to all six departments of ancient Chinese central government, including administration, agriculture and

finance, education and foreign affairs, defence, justice, water resources and construction (ibid.). 公公 or ‘eunuch’ is omitted in the English subtitle, whereas the archaic 侍郎 is modernised into ‘general’. The reason why Deputy Minister Wu is subtitled into General Wu is explained by Prince Wan’s enquiry subsequent to the current subtitle, which is ‘是兵部的吴侍郎?’ or ‘Deputy Minister Wu of the Ministry of Defence?’¹ It turns out the deputy minister whom Chan and Wan mentions takes charge of the state army or Ministry of Defence. If this minister obeys the empress’s orders, the emperor’s ruling will be threatened. Perhaps many Chinese audiences may not realise 侍郎 refers to a military general. This information which is not so conspicuous in the source can be considered as treated with *particularising translation* where details that are not explicitly expressed in the source are added to the target text (Hervey and Higgins, 1992: 95). The subtitler has chosen to reveal General Wu’s military responsibility immediately in the current example. To slightly create suspense, the subtitler might use ‘Minister Wu’ in Chan’s remark first and specify Ministry of Defence in Wan’s subsequent enquiry, like:

Chan: Her Majesty had them all delivered to Minister Wu.

Wan: General Wu of the state army?

The three examples in this section demonstrate that obsolete nouns can often be translated with strategies of simplification or modernisation. Although information in the archaisms is diluted, the most basic meanings can still be retained.

2. Idioms

Apart from nouns, a variety of archaic markers are also discovered in the three films. Archaic sentence structures, obsolete verbs and idioms are all features of obsolescence, although idioms are especially visible. In comparing two Chinese translations of *Don Quixote*, Ji (2009: 61-62) argues that the figurative language of archaism is ‘transmittable and traceable’ when rendered into the target language. When a Castilian proverb or idiom is translated into modern Chinese, it may well metamorphose into a Chinese metaphor, metonymy or hyperbole, or vice versa (ibid.: 62). She maintains that idiomatic expressions are perceived as archaisms by contemporary Mandarin Chinese readers (ibid.),

¹ The correspondent English subtitle in the film is ‘Of the state army?’

possibly because idioms usually originate from ancient classics. Explication is frequently adopted to cope with the translation of the Chinese idioms in the three films. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995: 342), *explicitation* is a term adopted to describe a phenomenon where the target text explicates the original in a more intelligible way, usually by adding explanatory words or including connectives. Blum-Kulka (1986: 19) views explicitation as inherent in the process of translation and a translation will be explicitly more cohesive than the source.

In *Hero*, the news of swordsman and assassin Nameless' elimination of the assassins Sky, Flying Snow and Broken Sword travels across Qin. He is hailed a hero, while the prime minister speaks of his relief in Example (4):

(4)

SL	从此我王可以高枕无忧了
Literal translation	From now on my king can sleep on a high pillow without worry!
TL	From now on his majesty can once more sleep without fear!

‘高枕无忧’ indicates to pile pillows up and sleep tight, for there is nothing to fear. The focus is to sleep without fear, whereas piling pillows high is a sign of relief. Thus, the idiom emphasises the peace and safety that the King regains after the death of his fatalist enemies and that he can finally sleep at night. The English subtitle explicates the source meaning, but the weakness is the length, as ‘from now on’ is directly transferred from ‘从此’. Given that 从此 is an adverbial which is self-evident in the context, it might be reasonable to omit it.

Nameless recalls his duel with the assassin Sky before the King. An elderly blind musician nearby is daunted by their duel and stands up to leave, but Nameless pays him to play more. He explains to the King that martial arts and music are different but share a similar principle, which is the phenomenon in Example (5):

(5)

SL	都讲求大音希声之境界
Literal translation	Both emphasise the state that the greatest sound is silent.
TL	Both wrestle with complex chords and rare melodies.

‘大音希声’ is a concept from *Dao De Jing* (or *Laozi*) written by one of the most renowned ancient Chinese philosophers Laozi (c. 571-471, or ‘Lao Tzu’ in Wade-Giles Romanisation spelling of Chinese). The idiom implies that the most overwhelming and beautiful music is often serene or approximately silent, i.e. the sublime is intangible (Zou and Li, 2006). Referring to this abstract notion, Nameless means, like the tranquillity of supreme music, the highest martial arts avoids emphasis on lethal fighting. The Chinese philosophy of ‘武’ or fighting, martial arts or war is significant in understanding why martial arts novels, films and TV dramas have fascinated many Chinese people for a long time. The character 武, observed carefully, consists of two characters, ‘止’ and ‘戈’ (Kong, 2014). 止 is to stop and 戈 is an ancient weapon, so 止戈 or 武 is to stop using the weapon or cease a fight. The philosophy of ‘止戈为武’ is simply ‘to put down the weapon is true martial arts’. The most beloved characters in the most popular martial arts novels are often those who have supreme fighting skills but decide to stay away from fights but protect people who are in need of help. Therefore, martial arts is not to fight in order to win, but to lay down the weapon, cease the war and embrace peace, says Professor Kong Qingdong (ibid.). 止戈为武 is also a strategy to rule a kingdom. This was first mentioned in the ancient *Commentary of Zuo* (《左传》) which recorded history from 722 to 468BC. Therefore, the philosophy of 大音希声 expounds why Nameless associates supreme music with supreme martial arts, as the former is neither loud nor noisy and the latter is neither battle nor killing. Therefore, regarding the true meaning of the source, the English translation more or less alters and adapts it, making it more explicit and connected to the context.

According to Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 161), *reformulation* which often involves the merger of sentences, can be necessary in subtitling. Example (6) manifests that the King questions and denies Nameless’ claim that a love affair has caused Broken Sword and Flying Snow’s death. He tells of his own opinion about them:

(6)

SL	在寡人看来 这二人光明磊落 气度不凡
Literal translation	In my opinion, the two of them are honest and frank and have gracious demeanour.
TL	I found them both honourable and exceptional,
SL	绝非小人之辈
Literal translation	(They) cannot be despicable people.
TL	hardly the narrow-minded people you say.

‘光明磊落’ is being very frank and honest with nothing shameful to hide. ‘气度’, though not an idiom, refers to a person’s bravery or tolerance towards difficult situations or other people’s mistakes. ‘不凡’ is not mediocre or exceptional. ‘小人’, superficially meaning ‘little people’, is a person who has no 气度 and behaves contemptibly and meanly. The English subtitle practically expresses the source implication fully. The merger or reformulation of the two phrases 光明磊落 and 气度不凡 is evident in this translation. Strictly speaking, strategies applied in transferring the three examples in this section may not exclude simplification, but undeniably, the outcome is that the subtitles express the source implication more directly.

3. Adverbs

Nouns and idioms tend to be crucial to the conveyance of sense in a sentence, whereas adverbs might contain less substantial information. Yet, adverbs are still functional. Reformulation is an essential strategy in coping with archaic adverbs. In the Chinese dialogue of the three films, out-of-date adverbs are reformulated and combined with verbs. We may also say that they are simply omitted, as they generally demonstrate no concrete meaning, or are even considered redundant. Even if subtitle readers are constantly engaged in a dynamic reading of English subtitles, it will barely occur to them what adverbs and verbs are like in the source Chinese dialogue. Thus, this section intends to examine the source adverbs and analyse how they are treated in the English subtitles.

In *Hero*, when Nameless is summoned to the court of Qin to receive awards and answer the King's questions, he informs the King of having discovered assassins Flying Snow and Broken Sword in a calligraphy school who have been using their aliases, which is mentioned in Example (7):

(7)

SL	高山先生便是残剑
Literal translation	Master High Mountain is exactly Broken Sword.
TL	Broken Sword's power was immediately apparent to me.

The archaic mark in this line is the adverb ‘便’ that does not imply any concrete meaning. 便 is combined and reformulated with the verb ‘是’ to mean ‘was’ in this subtitle, but 是 itself can also be considered as the equivalent of the linking verb ‘be’. However, the English subtitle has added extra information but deleted Broken Sword's alias.

In *House of Flying Daggers*, Mei, a member from House of Flying Daggers, attempts to kill police captain Leo and is arrested. Example (8) stems from a conversation between Captain Jin and Leo after Mei's arrest. While scheming with Leo to reach the headquarters of the House, Jin comments on Mei's appearance:

(8)

SL	也好 这小妹颇有姿色
Literal translation	All right. Mei has quite good looks.
TL	All right. This girl is a rare beauty.

‘颇’ is an obsolete adverb which means ‘very’, while ‘有’ means to have/own; ‘姿色’ refers to one's good looks. According to Catford (1965: 73), a ‘shift’ is a departure from formal correspondence in the process of going from the source language to the target language. In this case, 颇 is combined with the verbal phrase ‘有姿色’ (have good looks) to be translated into ‘is a rare beauty’, so no evident word class shift happens in this reformulation. Only beautiful appearance is rendered into a beauty.

As the scheme of the police goes, Jin rescues Mei from the prison and flees with her to find the headquarters. On their way, he attempts to seduce Mei, and yet to his disappointment, she is hesitant and eventually refuses his advance. He makes such a remark in Example (9):

(9)

SL	我原以为小妹是团烈火
Literal translation	I originally thought Mei was as passionate as fire.
TL	I thought you were hot as fire.

‘原’, literally meaning ‘originally’ or ‘before’, will be ‘原来’ in modern Chinese. Compared with some other languages, Chinese verbs do not conjugate but remain the same under all circumstances. The Chinese language relies on adverbs or adverbial phrases to reveal tenses. Thus, ‘thought’ in the English translation does not infer the past tense of the source verb, but rather the adverb ‘原’. This adverb hardly has any influence on the subtitle reader’s understanding of the film plot, making reformulation presumably the optimal way to translate it, although the translation may cause an illusion that Chinese is similar to English in terms of tense and conjugation. The three examples in this section seem to show that adverbs as archaic marks can often be translated with the reformulation strategy.

4. Four-character phrases

Other than nouns, idioms and adverbs, another apparent feature of archaism is four-character phrases. This paper has included a section about idioms. Unlike most idioms that also consist of four characters, the four-character phrases this paper refers to are not firm combinations of four characters. Those phrases are a significant linguistic phenomenon of the Chinese language. They are still visible in modern days, especially in formal or literary registers, though they unavoidably produce an archaic effect in film dialogue. Nonetheless, English is so different that retaining the source structure with four words or syllables can be very difficult, if manageable. While certain cases of four-character phrases again require condensation and reformulation, others can be transferred fully, in order for subtitle readers to attain complete information from the source.

In an early sequence from *Hero*, Nameless recalls before the King how he travels to the calligraphy school to find assassins Broken Sword and Flying Snow. There he requests a piece of calligraphy by Broken Sword. Before Broken Sword finishes it, Qin's army have arrived and started an arrow attack. The plot returns to Nameless in court as he comments on the attacking model of Qin's army in Example (10):

(10)

SL	大王军队每到一处 必例行放箭 试探敌情 威慑四方
Literal translation	Anywhere Your Majesty's army arrives, they will invariably begin an an arrow attack (in order to) detect the enemy's situation. The power (of Your Majesty's army) overwhelms all enemies.
TL	Wherever they venture their reputation precedes them.

‘例行放箭’, ‘试探敌情’ and ‘威慑四方’ are three four-character phrases. This sentence describes Qin's model of attack and its power. The English subtitle has reformulated the source into a fairly concise sentence, and omitted the purpose of such an arrow attack, which is to test the enemy's capacity. If the source had been translated into two subtitles, it might have been rendered more completely, as it takes Nameless around five seconds to finish the source line in the film. For instance, ‘They always begin with an arrow attack. Their reputation precedes them.’

In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, when the emperor challenges his three sons if they are aware of the reason why he always holds a banquet on the Chrysanthemum Festival, the youngest prince Yu replies in Example (11):

(11)

SL	禀父王 九月九日
Literal translation	Emperor Father, (on) the 9th September,
TL	Father, on the ninth day of the ninth month...
SL	两九相重 日月并阳
Literal translation	two nines go together and the sun and the moon unite.
TL	the sun and the moon unite.

‘九月九日’ and ‘日月并阳’ are both translated into English. The untranslated phrase is the second one ‘两九相重’ which means two ‘nines’ go together. The Chrysanthemum Festival is the 9th of September in the Chinese lunar calendar. ‘九’ (nine) is a homophone of ‘久’ that suggests longevity or long-lasting well-being. Therefore, nine is an auspicious number in China. Families used to reunite and worship their ancestors on that day too. Omitting that phrase can avoid causing subtitle reader confusion and render the subtitle brief.

The patriarchal emperor has been compelling the empress to take medicine for years, although she is not ill. He expounds his excuses in Example (12) to her:

(12)

SL	你肝火过盛
Literal translation	You have excess liver heat.
TL	You have excess bile...
SL	脾胃虚寒
Literal translation	(Your) spleen and stomach are weak and cold.
TL	poor digestion...
SL	阴阳失调
Literal translation	Yin and yang are unbalanced.
TL	Yin and Yang are out of balance.
SL	脾气焦躁
Literal translation	(Your) temper is quick.
TL	That is why you are fractious...
SL	遇事毫无兴致
Literal translation	(You are) interested in nothing,
TL	listless and lethargic...
SL	整天冷言冷语
Literal translation	making cold remarks every day.
TL	capable of nothing but cold remarks.

The six phrases ‘肝火过盛’, ‘脾胃虚寒’, ‘阴阳失调’, ‘脾气焦躁’, ‘毫无兴致’ and ‘冷言冷语’ are separately translated into English with their meanings generally transferred. The emperor always speaks with a noble manner, so his speech speed is slower compared to other characters. That allows the subtitler to provide correspondent English subtitles for all the phrases. Hence, the possibility of translating archaic phrases also depends on the speech speed. The four-character phrases in this section have mostly been translated, though

antiquity is unavoidably lost. If the speech speed permits, the source line can be more entirely retained.

Conclusion

Archaisms reflect usages from earlier periods. Those identified in the three films have been categorised into nouns, idioms, adverbs and four-character phrases. Modernisation and simplification have been frequently adopted to handle nouns. Chinese idioms, like those in other languages, often contain intricate specifics and requires explicitation for the sake of instantaneous intelligibility. Owing to the lack of implicatures, adverbs have often been reformulated with other elements, often verbs. It can be difficult to retain the archaic tone of four-character phrases in target language subtitles. And yet, it has been possible to reproduce the original meaning, especially when the speech speed is slow.

Archaisms in the Chinese dialogue imply historicity in speech. Even though there is obvious modernisation and explicitation, extreme omission has not been evident. Objectively speaking, although subtitle readers can hardly notice antiquity in the renditions, visual representation and music convey significant obsolescence to subtitle readers. *Hero* showcases a calligraphy school where Broken Sword and Flying Snow practice calligraphy with bamboo sticks and sand. They use a thin and long bamboo stick to write in a shallow layer of sand in a tray, and then scrape the sand to write again, which saves ink and paper. In *House of Flying Daggers*, two pieces of classic solo dance have been beautifully presented. Zhang Ziyi performs *Beauty in the North* (《北方有佳人》) and *Immortal Points Direction* (《仙人指路》). The first one involves gentle and graceful movements, whereas the second is more energetic. She wears dance costumes in an ancient style with two long sleeves. The sleeves will be flung gently or with strength to express different emotion. Interestingly, although the star Zhang Ziyi was a dance college graduate, Zhang Yimou employed two doubles for her, aiming at achieving the optimal aesthetic effect (Nemo, 2005). Moreover, both dances are accompanied by traditional Chinese instruments, including *pipa* (琵琶) lute and three types of drums. Therefore, archaic visual and acoustic elements above all may compensate for the loss of antiquity in subtitles, as subtitle readers will inevitably notice them.

As Stubbs (2013: 39) puts it,

‘...the distinction between cinema and writing is nonetheless valid, and as a consequence historical films almost always contain large amounts of period detail, regardless of how serious they are about representing the past authentically. To put it another way, the majority of historical films carry a high information load in terms of the material detail they put on display, even if they chose to avoid other types of information about the past.’

All the details in film sets are utilised by the filmmaker to make history visible again (ibid.). Foreign viewers discover history visually through the details which also render the film watching historical. Importantly, what Stubbs mentions as ‘avoided’ types of information might include historical details in film dialogue and on-screen texts. It is almost impossible to make the dialogue completely authentic to the time period a film portrays, as the language of the period can be so obsolete or dead that contemporary viewers will struggle to understand it. Therefore, a slightly old-fashioned speech register might be archaic enough to represent history and correlate with all the visible details. Yet, no matter how insignificant the language style in a historical film is, it still contributes to conveying historicity just like visual cues such as furniture in a room and a character’s clothing.

Although history is more likely to be demonstrated through cinematic representation, occasionally filmmakers like Zhang Yimou indeed historicise film dialogue, for example Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *The Assassin* (2015). In spite of the visual and acoustic history portrayal, film dialogue and subtitles can still play the role of depicting particular eras to some extent. Interestingly, when one character says more archaisms than others, it is quite possible that this character is nostalgic. The inclusion of such ‘peculiar’ language can also produce a comic effect. For instance, the librarian from *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940) who says ‘What is thee wish?’ and ‘If thee will consult my colleague in there’. Additionally, even if archaism or a historic language is employed throughout a film, they ought not to be deemed entirely the same as modern dialogue in subtitling. Violent modernisation could generate an illusion that the source dialogue is utterly contemporary. Notwithstanding the necessity of altering archaic lines to different levels, a respectful and formal style of translation should be a norm and colloquialisms avoided, which is the most basic strategy of handling historical subtitling. Such a mode together with a historical representation can better convey antiquity.

References

- Baker, M. (1993) 'Corpus linguistics and translation studies: implications and applications.' In Baker, M., Francis, G. and Tognini-Bonelli, E. (eds.) *Text and technology: in honour of John Sinclair*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 233-250.
- Bann, S. (1984) *The clothing of Clío*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1986) 'Shifts of cohesion and coherence in translation.' In House, J. and Blum-Kulka, S. (eds.) *Interlingual and intercultural communication*, Tübingen: Narr, pp. 17-35.
- Díaz Cintas, J. and Remael, A. (2007) *Audiovisual translation: subtitling*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Catford, J. C. (1965) *A linguistic theory of translation*. London, OUP.
- Curse of the Golden Flower*. 满城尽带黄金甲. (2006) Directed by Y. Zhang. [DVD] UK: Universal Pictures.
- Craig, C. (1991) 'Rooms without a view.' *Sight and sound*, June pp. 10-13.
- Dong, S. and Jing, X. (2013) 'An attempt to analyse the arrangement of officials of the Six Departments in the early Tang Dynasty.' *Lantai World*, November pp. 141-142.
- Gu, Y. (1990) 'Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese.' *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14 pp. 237-257.
- Hero*. 英雄. (2002) Directed by Y. Zhang. [DVD] EU: Buena Vista Home Entertainment.
- Hervey, S. and Higgins, I. (1992) *Thinking translation: a course in translation method: French to English*. London: Routledge.
- House of Flying Daggers*. 十面埋伏. (2004) Directed by Y. Zhang. [DVD] UK: 20th Century Fox.
- Ji, M. (2009) 'Corpus stylistics in translation studies: two modern Chinese translations of *Don Quixote*.' *Language and Literature*, 18(1) pp. 61-73.
- Jones, F. R. and Turner, A. (2004) 'Archaisation, modernisation and reference in the translation of older texts.' *Across languages and cultures*, 5(2) pp. 159-185.
- Kong, Q. (2014) Kong Qingdong speaks of Jin Yong's martial arts novels at New York University. [Online] [Accessed on 7th August 2015] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHcEuKga6uM>
- Leighton, L. G. (1991) 'The Soviet concept of time and space.' In Larson, M. L. (ed.) *Translation: theory and practice, tension and interdependence*, Binghamton: State University of New York, pp. 49-62.

- Li, S. (2007) 'Looking into the development of Middle Chinese word formation through data of disyllabic and polysyllabic words.' *Journal of Ningxia University (Humanities & Social Sciences Edition)*, 29(1) pp. 1-7
- McArthur, T. B. and McArthur, R. (2005) *Concise Oxford companion to the English language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McKechnie, K. (2002) 'The royal biopic.' In Monk, C. and Sargeant, A. (eds.) *British historical cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 217-236.
- Monk, C. (2002) 'The British heritage-film debate revisited.' In Monk, C. and Sargeant, A. (eds.) *British historical cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 176-198.
- Muraleedharan, T. (2002) 'Imperial migrations: reading the Raj cinema of the 1980s.' In Monk, C. and Sargeant, A. (eds.) *British historical cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 144-162.
- Nemo (2005) 'Zhang Ziyi's *Immortal Points Direction* involved two doubles – a man and a woman.' [Online] [Accessed on 11th August 2015] http://ent.163.com/ent/editor/movie/050608/050608_422094.html
- Rosenstone, R. A. (2001) 'The historical film: looking at the past in a post literate age.' In Landy, M. (ed.) *The historical film: history and memory in media*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, pp. 50-66.
- Steiner, G. (1992) *After Babel: aspects of language and translation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Stubbs, J. (2013) *Historical film: a critical introduction*. New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Venuti, L. (1998) *The scandals of translation*. London, Routledge.
- Venuti, L. (1996) 'Translation, heterogeneity, linguistics.' *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 9(1) pp. 91-115. [Online] [Accessed on 28th June 2017] <https://books.google.com.hk/>
- Vinay, J. P. and Darbelnet, J. (1995) *Comparative stylistics of French and English: a methodology for translation*. Philadelphia, Pa: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Zhao, X. (2008) 'Discovering "cheng, yi, ting and zhang" in *The law and order of Year Two*, the bamboo slips from the Han Dynasty found in Zhangjiashan.' *New west*, 12 [Online] [Accessed on 17th April 2015] <http://www.docin.com/p-682568399.html>
- Zuo, H. (2007) 'Research on the musical officials at *jiaofang* and *neijiaofang* of the Tang Dynasty.' *Journal of Ningxia University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 29(1) pp. 29-32.
- Zou, Y. and Li, H. (2006) 'Analyse the essence of Laozi's music aesthetic thought through "Da yin xi sheng".' *Wuhan University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 59(1) pp. 32-36.