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# Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Skopostheorie -- A Case Study of *Youth*

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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the rapid development of the Internet and the film industry, more and more Chinese films and TV series have been exported to foreign countries. However, many films that have won praises in China have got low ratings after going abroad. Subtitle translation is one of the main reasons. As an indispensable part of films, subtitle translation has also attracted extensive attention in recent years. People are paying more and more attention to the quality of subtitle translation in a movie. This article will focus on the three rules of Skopostheorie, which are Skopos Rule, Coherence Rule and Coherence Rule. The common ground of two perspectives is based on the three rules of Skopostheorie and language receivers. This article will select the English version of *Youth* which is a famous film in China as the research object and analyze the subtitle translation strategies in Chinese movies from the perspective of linguistics and culture, and advocate different strategies for different situations to achieve the best translation. From these two perspectives, there are several practical strategies can be used in subtitle translation. In addition to the application of Skopostheorie in translation, it also has great significance for Chinese movie.

**Keywords:** Skopostheorie, Subtitle Translation, Translation Strategy

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the rapid development of the Internet and the film industry, globalization has made cultural exchanges in various countries more abundant, and more and more Chinese movies and TV series have been exported abroad. In this process, films contribute to spread the unique culture and ideas of each country, and subtitle translation is also an essential part of it. Subtitle translation allows people in different countries to understand each other, and it also affects the quality of a screen work perceived by foreign audiences. Good subtitle translation not only allows the original film to be presented to foreign audiences, but it can also spread the national culture in its entirety. Although the number of film and television works output by China in recent years is huge, the quality of subtitle translation is at different levels. Once many classic and excellent films going abroad, they will get a low rating. Most of this is affected by

subtitle translation. Therefore, in order to export excellent Chinese films and TV series abroad, so that foreign audiences understand Chinese thoughts, and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on subtitle translation and improve the quality of subtitle translation.

Foreign research on subtitle translation has developed very well, which has a specific theoretical system has been formed, such as the features, skills, principles, and standards of subtitle translation. In China, the research on subtitle translation is still lack, especially compared with other kinds of literary translation that seem like novel translation and poetry translation, etc. Therefore, no matter from the short-term purpose, in order to allow foreign audiences to know excellent Chinese films, or from a long-term perspective, to gain the international recognition of Chinese culture and increase the spread of Chinese culture, the research of subtitle translation is imminent.

This article uses the movie *Youth* as an example to study the subtitle translation strategy. *Youth* is a literary film adapted from novel of the same name. The story takes place

in the 1970s and 1980s, and the main place is in the military art troupe. The director Feng Xiaogang chose a series of image events with extremely new realistic colors, which made the film quite representative. The film caused a lot of global attention and comments, and unfolded the “Youth boom”. The language, songs, and cultural background of a particular era in the movie are all characteristics of that era in China. Therefore, this representative movie is selected as an example to conduct research on subtitle translation.

### 1.2. Research Significance

At present, the world’s cultural exchanges are frequent, the scale of import and export of films is constantly expanding. However, the quality of subtitle translation is not deserved to people’s attention. Because some terrible renderings appeared in the Chinese translation market without any authorized certification. Therefore, some related studies are the key to deal with the phenomenon which will affect Chinese subtitles. Western-related academic research is much earlier than that of China. They already have a very mature experimental foundation and theoretical system. The reason is that the attention it receives is far from enough, which makes the current translation of film subtitles lack scientific guidance as compared with other literary translations.

From a macro perspective, if there is no high-quality translation works in the translation market, it will greatly affect the export of Chinese movies go abroad. And if China wants to gain cultural recognition, it must inevitably improve the quality of screen subtitle translation. This requires that our research on subtitle translation should not just stay on the surface, but should learn from the western research results. Meanwhile, it is also needs to be combined with the actual situation in China. Through continuous practice and audience selection in the Chinese market, then will finally get the subtitle translation theory that is unique to China and conforms to the international market. In this thesis, the film *Youth* is selected as the analysis text, hoping to provide some useful reference for translators on subtitle translation strategies. Based on the above analysis, the research significance of the text has the following three points:

First, accelerate the development of domestic research in related fields, which has aroused the attention of the academic community, and then quickly has a complete subtitle translation theory to promote the development of this academic field.

Secondly, the theory and practice will be used to improve the quality of subtitle translation, so that foreign audiences can better understand the plot and convey the outstanding works to the world.

Third, foreign countries will more understand China and enhance their favorability and recognition of Chinese culture. It will not only benefit China-foreign exchanges, but also expands China’s influence in the world.

### 1.3. Layout of the Thesis

This article is composed of five parts:

The first part is introduction, which explains the research background, research significance and thesis layout of this article.

The second part is to introduce the classification and characteristics of subtitles, analyze the theory of subtitle translation and related results of previous studies. At the same time, it studies the development of Skopostheorie with the three rules of the theory.

The third part is the application and influence of Skopostheorie in subtitle translation, and subtitle translation is affected by some factors.

The fourth part briefly introduces the movie *Youth*. Based on the content of the third part, it analyzes the Skopostheorie in subtitle translation strategies from the perspectives of linguistic and culture.

The fifth part is the conclusion. First, it summarizes the influence and guiding significance of Skopostheorie on subtitle translation. Secondly, it provides references on some specific issues and some translation strategies applicable to Chinese movie subtitle translation.

## 2. Studies on Subtitle Translation

### 2.1. Studies Abroad

Western research on subtitle translation has been for a long time and the research results are remarkable. As early as 1950s, some scholars have begun to pay attention to this field. In 1960, the first dissertation on screen translation studies *Babel titled Cinema and et Traduction* was published, which found the key to subtitle translation studies in the western academic community. In 1974, Professor Cay Dollerup [1] of the University of Copenhagen, published an important article on subtitle translation, entitled *On Subtitles in Television Program*. The languages involved in this article are English and Danish. The main content was to analyze the errors in the translation of English into Danish and these mistakes affected the audience’s understanding. He also mentioned the importance of subtitle translation, which also had an impact on later research.

Subtitle translation research has entered a relatively slow stage until 1987, a conference that the theme is dubbing and subtitles was held in Stockholm, Sweden. It is very commemorative for Europe, because this is the first European conference on subtitle translation. Subsequent results also confirmed this. The influence of this conference is undoubtedly huge. More and more conferences, related scholar research and various publications have made subtitle translation becoming a popular research field for scholars.

In the 1990s, new book appeared in the field of subtitle translation. In 1992, Swedish subtitle translator Jonas Ivarsson [2] wrote a book that named *Subtitling for the Media: A Handbook of an Art*. This book is not only the first book on subtitle translation, but also has a profound influence on the current subtitle translation. He added some different and useful translation strategies and techniques in the second edition of the book. This book had far-reaching significance

for later European subtitle translation.

Since 1995, research on translation of screen subtitles in the west has developed rapidly, and in this year, European Association for Studies in Screen Translations was established. It played a vital role in the field of European screen translation research and had a great impact. Many members of this association are very authoritative. They have made many achievements in the study of subtitle translation and published many practical publications. Subtitle translation has gradually appeared internationally and developed rapidly.

## 2.2. *Studies at Home*

In fact, China's research in the field of subtitle translation is later than that of Western countries. In other words, China's research results and academic papers in this field are far less than those of Western academic circles. Some research results are more repetitive and have not kept pace with the times. But in China, several translators are very famous and their translation strategies are widely recognized. They summed up their own translation experience and cleverly integrated these translation strategies with subtitle translation. They are Ma Zhengqi, Zhang Chunbai, and Qian Shaochang.

For the research on the characteristics of subtitle translation, Professor Zhang Chunbai [3] analyzed the features of screen language into immediacy and publicity by analyzing the differences between screen translation and general literary translation.

For the study of subtitle translation skills, Professor Qian [4] has full of translation experience. He combined his accumulated experience to sum up seven subtitle translation strategies: 1. let the audiences distinguish the gender of the third person in the dialogue through translation; 2. the content of the actors' line should be synchronized and consistent with their mouth shape, so it needs to modify the content at any time during translation to ensure that the length is consistent; 3. Translation when there is a pause in the dialogue; 4. If gestures or special actions appear in the dialogue, they also should be translated; 5. When meeting some difficulties in cultural elements, try to explain them to audiences or give them some definitions which can help them understand the plot; 6. Translation of puns and word games; 7. The content of the translation must be concise, clear and smooth, and cannot make the audiences feel that the dialogue is untenable or confused.

For the research on the principles of subtitle translation, Professor Ma [5, 6] put forward a new idea. He analyzed the basic principles of screen translation from some aspects in the article *On the Basic Principles of Film and Television Translation*, including oral, emotional, and popular, which depended on translation cases. It affected later research and practical development.

The progress of the academic community and translators cannot leave from the hard work and perseverance of these scholars. It is also the results of these predecessors that can make Chinese subtitle translation more and more excellent.

Based on the translation strategy that they summarized, today's academic research is well-founded. They used their own translation experience to summarize the types and characteristics of subtitles, which is great significance for later research. [7] However, despite the research by these scholars, the theoretical basis for Chinese subtitle translation is still not well developed, so more efforts are needed in the field of subtitle translation.

## 3. Skopostheorie and Its Application in Subtitle Translation

### 3.1. *Three Rules of Skopostheorie*

Based on the above analysis, the following part will briefly mention three important rules in Skopostheorie: the skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule. According to the core idea of Skopostheorie, the skopos rule is paramount, and the other two rules are subordinate.

First one is Skopos Rule. Vermeer [8] put forward that there may be three kinds of purposes in the field of translation; they are the purpose of the translator, the communicative purpose in the target environment, and the purpose of a specific translation strategy. This rule suggests that any translations should follow a correct way and be translated in the target language environment. It seems like put the conversation into the certain condition which people will use or understand. [9] Skopos theory rules that the translator must positively, consistently translate in some translation strategies which won't change in a text.

Second one is Coherence Rule. The coherence rule includes two consistencies: intra-textual consistency and inter-textual consistency. Intra-textual consistency means the internal consistency of the translation. The reader of the translation can understand it within the cognitive scope, which means that the information will be useful and easy to understand after the translator's rewrite of the source text which suitable in the certain environment condition. The inter-textual consistency between texts refers to content consistency between the source text and the target text. After translation, the content of the two texts needs to be the most consistent, and the content or meaning of the original text cannot be changed after translation.

Third one is Fidelity Rule. The ultimate purpose of translation is to convey information to language recipients, but because different people are affected by different cultural backgrounds, then translation must obey the Skopos rule, not the source text. So, this is the core of the fidelity rule. [10] Fidelity emphasizes the relationship between people, and is used here to refer to the relationship between the translator, the original author, the recipient of the translation, and the client. There are two definitions that people will confuse. They are Fidelity and Faithfulness. Fidelity is different from the faithfulness, because the second one focuses on the relationship between the translation and the source text. It can be seen that fidelity has a deeper meaning than faithfulness, which means that the purpose of the translation

should be consistent with the intention of the original author.

### 3.2 *The Application of Skopostheorie in Subtitle Translation*

#### 3.2.1. *Finding Films' Value*

Movie is telling a story. And a good movie usually contains social and entertainment, but also has commercial value. The story, shooting methods, and actors of each movie may affect the final profit. In other words, every detail of the movie may affect the final box office. So when foreign audiences watch Chinese movies, the most likely influence on their judgment is subtitle translation. Only by removing language and cultural barriers then we can gain more foreign audiences and thus achieve the goal of maximum benefits. An excellent movie with easy-to-understand subtitles can easily receive the audience's favorite, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* directed by Li An. The movie has multiple award-winning records, including 4 awards like the 73rd Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. And it is the first film in the history of Chinese movie to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

#### 3.2.2. *Conveying Films' Information*

The fidelity rule in Skopostheorie can illustrate this point. If we want to convey information on intact, adhering to this rule is necessary. The translation between two languages must not lack equivalence. Once the meanings of the two languages do not match, the translation will be meaningless. Due to the influence of language and culture, some oral or spoken sentences in movie subtitles may cause mistranslation.

For example, in the movie *Jacob's Ladder*, there was a mistranslation. When the protagonist fought on the battlefield in Vietnam, he said 'we have heavy gunfire'. And the source translation is '我们有重武器' which was translated literally. In spoken English, it likes to use active voice to express passive voice, but combined with the language background, this sentence should mean that 'we are being severely hit' (我们正受到严重打击). Therefore, the complete transmission of information is a very important part of subtitle translation. Otherwise, the audience will be confused, resulting in the inability to watch the film smoothly.

#### 3.2.3. *Explaining Films' Significance*

The significance of a movie is not just to watch a two-hour story, but also to experience a different life. Good movies are not telling the truth directly, the key is to feel by audiences after watching a movie. [11] Some of these feelings are what the director wants to tell the public, and some are understood by people themselves. Only when people combine the plot of the movie with themselves, then they can feel own thoughts. The audience realizes a different life through the movie. Maybe he is an alien or a tramp. This is what the movie really means. Therefore, excellent subtitle translation will give the audience a sense of substitution so that they can truly integrate into the movie world and explore their own meaning. [12].

Skopostheorie provides a new perspective for the study of

translation theory. It breaks the traditional translation theory's emphasis on the author of the source text, and emphasizes the initiative of the translator. It provides the translator with a greater choice of translation strategies. Skopostheorie also includes translation into the scope of cross-cultural communication to study the impact of target culture on translation activities in the context of target culture. In addition, Skopostheorie pays more attention to the language receiver's feelings. Language recipients not only need to understand the content of the text, but also receive information that matches their own cultural background and language environment. This is rarely mentioned in previous translation studies. As the core point of Skopostheorie, this also provides new ideas for the future of translation theory research, and has great significance for the subsequent development.

From a long-term perspective, the emergence of Skopostheorie provides translators and scholars with different perspectives and translation strategies. From the traditional article-to-article comparison, it has become more focused on the understanding of language recipients. Skopostheorie will make translation more flexible and diversify the use of translation strategies.

## 4. The Translation Strategies in *Youth*

### 4.1. *Introduction of Youth*

The film *Youth* was directed by Feng Xiaogang and adapted from the novel of the same name by writer Yan Geling. The story takes place in the 1970s and 1980s, and the main place is in the art troupe. At the beginning of the film, Xiao Suizi began to recall the past. Since the storytelling Xiao Suizi was a major member of the art troupe, the insertion of this perspective subtly brought the audience to the highly realistic art troupe. The army art troupe is a comprehensive literary and artistic group led by the Communist Party of China, which uses propaganda activities such as singing, dancing, and acting. Furthermore, the art troupe is a relatively special space with a certain degree of closeness, while the main members of the art troupe have a strong literary and artistic specialty and a clear political tendency. [13] The story tells about a group of boys and girls with dreams and passions in the 1970s. They experienced the warmth and pain of growth, the sweetness and bitterness of love, and the greatness of life in the context of the self-defense war and the reform and opening up. The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2017. It was released simultaneously in China and North America in October. It has received close to 1.4 billion box offices in mainland China alone, and has also achieved good results in North America.

Movies are generally commercial and entertaining products. The quality of the movie and the audience's degree of affection will directly influence the box office of the movie, so the target service of subtitle translation is the audience. First, the type of movie is most likely to affect subtitles. Different types of movies have subtitles in different language styles. For example,

both cartoons and comedies have a humorous language style. The audience of the former is mostly children, so the translation can be slightly younger. For instance, literary films need high-level language skills to create beautiful sentences. And some documentaries need to follow the original text as much as possible. Some proper nouns or cultural vocabulary related to countries and regions should keep the meaning in the source language. *Youth* is a film with historical elements, so it should avoid using some fashion or popular words in the subtitle translation, otherwise it will break the atmosphere of the film.

#### 4.2. Target Audience of Youth

As mentioned in the Skopostheorie, the receiver of the translation is the most important. Then in the subtitle translation, the audience of the movie is the purpose of translation. Because of that, in the cross-cultural translation, the expected reaction of the audience is also an issue that needs to be considered when preparing the subtitle translation. What are the characteristics of people in different countries or regions, or whether they have any expectations for movies? These are important questions. For example, some more academic films can be explained in professional terms as much as possible. On the one hand, create the best translation, on the other hand, to avoid offending the audience. Examples include words that prohibit racial discrimination, or a history of humiliation that a nation does not want to bring up.

The film *Youth* has a wide audience, because it represents people and events in a specific environment from the 1970s to the 1980s in China, and attracts many Chinese middle-aged and elderly audiences who use the film to remember time. Because the film reflects the real life through the continuation of a large number of daily events and the expression is full of artistic sense, which attracts a large number of Chinese young audiences. Furthermore, *Youth* is a film that integrates “red”, “youth” and “art”. It has both the vocabulary of “revolution”, “patriotism”, “dedication” and “hero”, as well as secret love between boys and girls. But for foreign audiences, most of them couldn't understand the background of that time and the shy communication between boys and girls. Therefore, the subtitle translation in *Youth* needs to explain the words with historical background and the characteristics of the era as much as possible. [14] At the same time, the words between the emotions of boys and girls should be more implicit.

#### 4.3. Strategies from Linguistic Perspective

##### 4.3.1. Condensation and Reformulation

It is very important to express the target language in a verbal and correct way. Spoken Chinese has a large number of verbs, so use lots of verbs and appropriate collocation in subtitle translation is the key of this strategy.

Table 1. Simplifying Verbal Periphrases.

00:10:39,208 --> 00:10:41,292	Warm up. 活动开了啊
00:11:21,542 --> 00:11:22,667	Don't over-do it. 行了夸张

This strategy is suitable for some Chinese verbs to be translated into English in the simplest and most spoken way, so that the audience can better understand the plot. Especially in the second example, if the source text translates literally into “That's enough, you're too exaggerated.”, then the rendering will be longer and nagging. Conversely, an excellent verb expression will make the audience feel kind, just like “Don't over-do it.”, it is shorter, simpler and efficient.

Table 2. Using a Shorter Near-Synonym or Equivalent Expression.

00:13:07,917 -->	I'm telling you, in this troupe, northerners rule.
00:13:10,500	我告诉你，这部队就是我们北方人的天下
00:48:32,833 -->	...and I long for a swift death.
00:48:34,500	就盼着早死早超生

This method can effectively shorten the length of the text, and choose equivalent expressions can be closer to the original meaning.

In both of these examples, there are some more complex content that, if directly translated or explained, will occupy a relatively large space. So the best solution is to use equivalent expression. ‘早死早超生’ is difficult to explain in one sentence, because it includes the ‘reincarnation’ which related to Chinese culture. So, the original translations are excellent.

Table 3. Changing Word Classes.

00:04:04,333 -->	That's not a military salute.
00:04:06,000	军礼不是这么敬的

A change in word class can offer shorter alternatives. The original verb became noun in translation. Because verbs are commonly used in Chinese, and nouns commonly used in English, in addition to making subtitles shorter, in order to correspond the language habits of the target language, it is also considered by the audience.

In this example, if the sentence is translated as “Don't salute the military salute like this”, it will be redundant. And this kind of expression is not commonly used in English that audiences will feel confused on it. So a change in word class as the example which changed the verb to noun is very useful for audiences to understand the conversation between two speakers.

Table 4. Changing Statements or Imperatives into Questions.

00:11:39,500 -->	Two weeks?
00:11:43,250	I can't wear a uniform until then? 还有两个星期我才能穿上军装啊
00:16:11,958 -->	Mocking me again?
00:16:13,292	又拿我开玩笑

Sometimes changing the mode of a sentence can have the added benefit of reducing its length. Generally speaking, when translating Chinese into English, question sentences are changed into statements or imperatives. In English, the opposite is correct, which is also consistent with the language habits of the two languages.

For example, in the first example, a sentence is divided into two sentences, and each part is a simple sentence, which will facilitate the audience to quickly look the subtitles and

understand the plot. And the sentence structure of second one is related to the language habit which is more familiar for foreigners. In many English movies, people are easy to find question sentences in a high frequency. For the foreign audiences, "Mocking me again?" is better than "You mocking me again".

#### 4.3.2. Omission

This strategy is also helpful to omit context in subtitle translation. Under the condition of conveying the necessary information, some meaningless or known content can be omitted appropriately.

Table 5. Known Information.

00:03:54,042 -->	Keep quiet about it,
00:03:56,167	进了团不要跟别人说这些

For example, He Xiaoping's family background cannot be known to other members, and the context before this sentence already mentioned this information, so the subtitle translation of this sentence can completely omit 'after joining the art troupe' instead of "Keep quiet about it after joining the art troupe".

#### 4.4. Strategies from Cultural Perspective

##### 4.4.1. Explication

This strategy is the most common and effective way to deal with cultural differences. Explain the content of the source text with equivalent content from both cultures, which translate the meaning of the original text and make it easy for foreign audiences to understand. [15].

Table 6. Explication.

00:15:13,833 -->	Liu Feng, you've got the Midas touch.
00:15:15,917	刘峰, 你手真巧
00:18:54,708 -->	To steal in a time of crisis!
00:18:56,792	趁火打劫
00:27:42,750 -->	Revolutionary forces cannot abide defects.
00:27:44,458	革命队伍里不容沙子
00:38:44,958 -->	He transferred to the stage crew and became a jack of all trades.
00:38:47,292	他转行去了舞美队, 当了一个万金油

For example, in these four examples, the second and third examples explain the hidden meaning of the original text. In the third example, it will be weird if translate it as "No sand allowed in the revolutionary team".

The first and fourth are explained by common sense in the west, which not only conveys the meaning, but also makes the translation flexible. For the first one, 'Midas touch' is a story for a king who can turn everything that he touched into gold. So 'Midas touch' often be used to describe someone who are dexterous, and it is very suitable to describe Liu Feng. For the fourth example, 'jack of all trades' means a person who can do many different types of work. It has an equivalent meaning of '万金油', so this kind of colloquialism can make subtitle translation more clear.

##### 4.4.2. Literal Translation

Literal translation is also a common translation strategy.

This kind of strategy sometimes makes it difficult for the audience to understand, but it will retain the language habits and style of the original text.

Table 7. Literal Translation.

00:35:48,667 -->	We have the guts to act and the guts to admit it.
00:35:51,458	有种干就要有种承认

If there is a sentence suitable for literal translation, this sentence may better convey the meaning of the source text and related cultural elements. In Chinese, '种' means 'seed' or 'guts', so for this sentence, literal translation will not affect the understanding of audiences, while retaining the language habits of the original text.

##### 4.4.3. Addition

This strategy also occurs in subtitling, especially in passages containing cultural references that are expected to cause comprehension problems but are essential for a good understanding of the plot. In such cases, information is added.

Table 8. Addition.

00:16:05,542 -->	You've got to write this up for the next notice-board.
00:16:08,125	这下期出墙报你可得好好写写啊

As mentioned in this example, people of that era would write things about helping others on the notice-board. When the protagonist who eats those uneaten, broken dumplings, everyone thinks this behavior is worth to appreciate. So in this episode, there will be a line saying, "You have to write well on the next notice-board". But for foreign audiences, they will be very confused and think there is no connection, so in this example, addition is a very good strategy to help the audience understand the plot.

## 5. Conclusion

Skopostheorie is an important part of the field of translation. It emphasizes the language receivers and target language environment to achieve the purpose of communication. At the same time, the purpose of translation also determines the strategy of translation. This article analyzes the strategy applicable to subtitle translation from the perspective of Skopostheorie in the context of the movie Youth as a case, hoping to provide a reference for the translator's future translation work. According to the analysis of the above two aspects and the film Youth as an example, the strategies of subtitle translation are mainly divided into two perspectives: linguistic perspective and cultural perspective. The common ground of two perspectives is based on the three rules of Skopostheorie and language receivers. In addition to the application of Skopostheorie in translation, it also has great significance for subtitle translation. One is to master the director's ideas and intentions, and the other one is to understand the needs of the audience. Properly conveying the director's intention is the most important part of the translation process. Only the understanding of the author's intention can correctly translate the meaning of the movie. The audience is

the verifier of the translation results, so their information will also affect the translation of movie subtitles. Such as cultural background, education level, language habits or language environment, etc. These will influence the choice of translation strategy and the quality of the final translation. Combined with Skopostheorie, it is not difficult to find that the strategy of subtitle translation has become clearer. Skopostheorie more considers the needs of the audience and the handling of cultural elements in film and television works, which will make a film more successful. I hope that the translation strategies mentioned in this article can help foreign audiences understand Chinese movies better and spread Chinese culture all over the world.

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