




RESEARCH ARTICLE

The translation of foreign films and cosmopolitan Shanghai (1896–1949)

Haina Jin 

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Communication University of China, Beijing, China
Email: jinhaina@cuc.edu.cn

(Received 5 March 2023; revised 7 January 2024; accepted 8 January 2024)

Abstract

This article examines the translation of foreign films in cosmopolitan Shanghai from 1896 to 1949. Silent films were introduced to China at the end of the nineteenth century, and live narration was provided to allow Chinese audiences to better understand Western shadow plays. With an increasing number of foreign films exhibited in Shanghai theatres, distributors and exhibitors made printed film plot sheets and experimented with the use of subtitles. With the arrival of sound cinema, experiments with techniques such as simultaneous interpretation, voiceover, and dubbing were also conducted. At this time, Shanghai was a semi-colonial city, where the languages spoken included the Shanghai dialect, Cantonese, standard Mandarin, and English, among others, and where the written Chinese language was transitioning from classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese. Film translation is perceived as a space where the mediation between the foreign and the local is materialized. Using materials such as official regulations, newspapers, memoirs, and archives, this article examines various modes of foreign film translation in Republican Shanghai to demonstrate the ways in which the vibrant translation activities of early cinema mediated between languages and cultures, connected local audiences with the foreign, and constructed a cosmopolitan cultural scene.

Keywords: Film translation; Hollywood; Chinese, modernity; cosmopolitanism

Introduction

There has been renewed interest in cosmopolitanism in recent years, and the important relationships between translation and cosmopolitanism have been discussed by scholars. As Bielsa states, translation, broadly defined as a specialized means of dealing with the foreign, offers a privileged method for examining the link between the global and the local, and for understanding the processes of global communication that lie at the centre of any contemporary notion of cosmopolitanism.¹ Delanty points out that translation provides ‘the possibility of incorporating the perspective of the

¹Esperança Bielsa, ‘Cosmopolitanism, translation and the experience of the foreign’, *Across Languages and Cultures*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2010, pp. 161–174.

Other into one's own culture'.² He further calls attention to the need to translate different world varieties of cosmopolitanism, and that this is a key aspect of the construction of a critical, non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism.³ Hannerz notably argues that 'the implosive power of the media may now make just about everybody a little more cosmopolitan'.⁴ Felicia Chan uses the concept of cosmopolitan cinema in her study of East and South Asian screen cultures; she maps the patterns of dubbing, subtitling, and simultaneous dual-language shooting across its history, and focuses her discussion on the ability and uncertainty of these practices in cross-cultural encounters.⁵

In the first half of the twentieth century, following the Opium wars and the establishment of Shanghai as a treaty port, the city emerged as China's largest metropolis for trade, finance, manufacturing, publishing, higher education, journalism, and many other important businesses; its growing population became increasingly diversified, with multiple classes that had different incomes and interests.⁶ Meanwhile, Shanghai was ruled by the fragmented sovereignty of semi-colonial China as embodied by the extraterritoriality of the French concessions and international settlements.⁷ In Shanghai, a variety of languages—including Chinese dialects such as the Shanghai dialect, Suzhou dialect, and Cantonese, as well as foreign languages—were used on a daily basis. Guoyu (standard Mandarin) was promoted by the nationalist government, and foreign languages, including English, French, Japanese, and Russian, were used in the concessions and settlements. The written Chinese language also experienced a transformation, as classical Chinese changed to vernacular Chinese in the 1910s and 1920s.

Film was introduced to China in 1896, and in the 1920s, theatregoing became a popular recreational activity in first- and second-tier Chinese cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and Qingdao.⁸ With the commencement of the First World War in Europe, American films began to flood the Chinese market. By the mid-1920s, Universal Columbia, First National, Fox, Paramount, RKO, United Artists, and Warner Brothers had all established offices in China.⁹ In 1929, 90 per cent of the 450 feature films shown in China were made in the United States.¹⁰ While Hollywood productions possessed the largest market share, French, English, and German films also had a

²Gerard Delanty, 'The cosmopolitan imagination: critical cosmopolitanism and social theory', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2006, pp. 25–47.

³Gerard Delanty, 'Not all is lost in translation: World varieties of cosmopolitanism', *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2014, pp. 374–391.

⁴Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1990, pp. 237–251.

⁵Felicia Chan, *Cosmopolitan cinema* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 1825.

⁶Wen-hsin Yeh, 'Shanghai modernity: Commerce and culture in a republican city', *The China Quarterly*, no. 150, 1997, pp. 375–394.

⁷Haiping Yan, 'Other cosmopolitanism', in *Cosmopolitanisms*, (eds) Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pp. 254–270.

⁸Yaping Ding, *General history of Chinese film*, (trans.) Haina Jin (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 53.

⁹Zhiwei Xiao, 'Hollywood in China, 1897–1950: A preliminary survey', *The Chinese Historical Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2005, pp. 71–96.

¹⁰Shuqin Cui, *Women through the lens: Gender and nation in a century of Chinese cinema* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2003), p. 45.

significant following. At times, production houses competed with one other.¹¹ The mediation of translation played a vital role in the legibility of foreign films for Shanghai audiences, who were provided with an opportunity to experience the foreign at home. Scholars such as Leo Ou-fan Lee, Zhang Yingjin, Xiao Zhiwei, Zhang Zhen, and Huang Xuelei have discussed various aspects of vibrant cinema activities in Shanghai. Though their publications have commented on the importance of translation as it relates to the introduction of foreign films to Shanghai, the translation of foreign films has never been the focus of their research and has only been mentioned briefly. Xiao found that, beginning in 1921, Universal Pictures and other Hollywood companies established offices in China to market their films. Usually, the office managers wrote the plot summaries and translated the films into Chinese. Their knowledge of both the culture and languages of China and the United States was clearly key to Hollywood's success in China.¹² Lee noted that the vast majority of foreign film titles were rendered in a classical vein, often with four Chinese characters, suggesting obvious references to traditional Chinese poetry and fiction.¹³ Huang Xuelei discusses the transmedia translation or adaptation of *East Lynne*, a Victorian bestseller from the 1860s, to *Konggu Lan* (Orchid in an Empty Valley; dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1925), a Chinese silent film. Zhang Zhen argues that as a complex translation machine and motor for change, early film culture in China generated a mass-mediated social and aesthetic experience and an inclusive vernacular modernity.¹⁴ Translation was essential to burgeoning film activities in Republican Shanghai. Foreign films were mediated for Chinese audiences via different translation modes, including live narration, film plot sheets, subtitling, simultaneous interpretation, voiceover, and dubbing. Such translation modes allowed Chinese audiences to understand the plots, narratives, and dialogues in foreign films, thus connecting them with the world. In this article, official regulations, newspapers, memoirs, and archives are utilized to reveal various modes of foreign film translation in Shanghai, and the ways in which foreign films were appropriated for Chinese audiences. I will examine film translation as a material and concrete practice through which cosmopolitanism—conceived of as an openness to the world and to others—was played out when the new medium was introduced in Shanghai, a semi-colonial city. It gained great popularity and, as a result, in the first half of the twentieth century, Shanghai went on to become the centre for Chinese film production.

Live narration

The first films shown in Shanghai at the end of the nineteenth century were silent. However, this did not mean that translation was unnecessary. Film itself was a foreign and novel medium, and intertitles in foreign languages as well as foreign cultures and customs were new to Chinese audiences. When foreign films were shown without

¹¹Zhiwei Xiao, 'Foreign films in China', in *Encyclopedia of Chinese film*, (eds) Yingjin Zhang and Xiao Zhiwei (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 70.

¹²Xiao, 'Hollywood in China, 1897–1950', pp. 71–96.

¹³Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai modern: The flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 90.

¹⁴Zhang Zhen, *An amorous history of the silver screen: Shanghai cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xxx.

any form of translation, the audience often felt puzzled or upset; this experience is reflected in one viewer's comment that 'whenever I saw one or two lines of foreign words on the screen, I guessed they were film titles. It was a pity that no-one near me knew western languages. I could not ask what they meant. I felt so sorry.'¹⁵ In Japan, film narrators (known as *benshi*) were employed to provide live narration for both Japanese and Western silent films, which allowed the audience to understand the action on the screen.¹⁶ Film narrators 'not only read the intertitles out loud, and often acted them out, for illiterate viewers, but also translated the title cards of foreign films'.¹⁷ From time to time, when foreign films were screened in Chinese tea houses, narrators were hired to explain them. As recorded by a viewer, when American films were screened in the Tianhua Tea Garden in Shanghai in 1897, a Chinese narrator provided commentaries so that the Chinese audience could understand the film.¹⁸ Later, when commercial cinemas were established, the performance of live film narration became a profession. Cinemas recruited narrators who were able to describe foreign films in Shanghai local languages.¹⁹ Wang Weiyi, a veteran Chinese director and screenwriter, recalled an impressive film-watching experience in his teenage years in Hongkew, Shanghai, in the 1920s:

The theatre hired two narrators. One spoke in Suzhou dialect, which Shanghainese all understand. The other spoke in Cantonese, because many Cantonese lived in Hongkew and many of the audience were Cantonese. The two narrators sat on the high platforms next to the screen. With the development of the plot, they spoke alternately. Their vivid narration similar to that of *Pingshu*,²⁰ excited the audience. In a low-class theatre like this one, audience can behave as they please. For example, when the masked hero appeared on a motorcycle, audience would imitate the sound of loudspeakers of motorcycles. When the hero galloped on a horse, the audience would match the scene with the sound of horses' hooves, far or near. When a herd of horses chased each other, the buzzing noise of horses' hooves would rise from the audience. When the hero fought with a villain, the whole audience would stamp the floor to cheer for the hero. When the hero won, the audience would applaud and cheer. When the villain escaped, the audience would curse him in Suzhou dialect and Cantonese. In watching the film, the emotion of the audience was fully released, and the feeling was great. It was one of the most enjoyable watching experiences in my whole life.²¹

¹⁵ Anonymous, 'Wei chun yuan guan ying xi ji (xu qian gao)' [Watching films in Weichun Garden], *Xinwenbao*, 13 June 1897.

¹⁶ Jeffery Dym, 'Benshi and the introduction of motion pictures to Japan', *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2000, pp. 509–536.

¹⁷ Carol O'Sullivan and Jean-François Cornu, 'History of audiovisual translation', in *The Routledge handbook of audiovisual translation*, (ed.) Luis Pérez-González (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 16–17.

¹⁸ Anonymous, 'Tian hua cha yuan guan wai yang xi fa gui shu suo jian [Review of foreign films I watched in Tianhua Tea Garden]', *You xi bao* [Game Newspaper], 16 August 1897.

¹⁹ Advertisement, *Shenbao*, 8 January 1927.

²⁰ *Pingshu* is the traditional Chinese performing art of oral storytelling with no musical accompaniment.

²¹ Weiyi Wang, *Nan wang de sui yue* [The forgettable days] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2006), pp. 1–2.

Wang Weiyi's description shows the narrator's effectiveness in engaging the audience with the foreign medium. The two narrators used local dialects, the most familiar languages of the audience, and resorted to *Pingshu*, the traditional Chinese storytelling art form, to enhance the interest of their narration. Through this face-to-face personal contact with the two narrators, the audience not only understood the plot, but also embraced the hero and the foreign medium, and even became a part of the film. Their active participation in the creation of sounds that matched the pictures transformed silent cinema into 'sound cinema'.

Another account by Shu Yin, a film critic and playwright, recalled the words used by film narrators from his childhood in 1920s Zhenjiang. Silent films such as *The Perils of Pauline* (dirs. Louis J. Gasnier and Donald MacKenzie, 1914) were shown. Such films included English intertitles, and a narrator would interpret the film in the local dialect. Their lines may have been written by the literati of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school in Shanghai. When the leading female character appeared, the narrator would comment,

Look at this girl! How pretty she is! What a nice look at a prime age! Her beauty makes the fish sink and birds alight. Her beauty outshines the moon and puts the flowers to shame.²²

When the leading male character appeared, he would continue,

Here comes a handsome young man! He has the looks like Pan An, who could attract girls to throw fruits at his carriage. He has the talents like Song Yu, whose mind was full of profound learning. The two make a great couple.²³

The narrator would continue to describe the scenes on the screen: 'They love each other at first sight. Did I say her beauty outshines the moon and puts the flowers to shame? My goodness! They are on fire.'²⁴

The narrator used Chinese four-character idioms to describe the physical appearances of the leading characters, such as '沉鱼落雁 (*chen yu luo yan*) [making the fish sink and birds alight]' and '闭月羞花 (*bi yue xiu hua*) [outshining the moon and putting the flowers to shame]'. Idioms such as '掷果盈车 (*zhi guo ying che*) [throwing fruits at his carriage]' were used to describe the leading male character, thus comparing his looks and talents with that of leading male historical figures such as Pan An and Song Yu. The two idioms 'making the fish sink and birds alight' and 'outshining the moon and putting the flowers to shame' were often used by Chinese writers to describe the beauty of a girl. Pan An and Song Yu were two famous scholars in Chinese history who were renowned for their handsome looks and literary talents. The idiom 'throwing fruits at his carriage' refers to stories of women who expressed their affection for Pan An by throwing fruit at his carriage. The use of such idioms rendered foreign characters more familiar, describing their looks in Chinese terms

²²Shu Yan, *Weisheng Duanmeng* [Broken dreams of an insignificant life] (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2000), p. 92.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

so that Chinese audiences were able to better relate to them. In addition, narrators spoke in the style of the love story literature from the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school, which, in the early twentieth-century China, was an immensely popular genre of fiction. In a sense, films with live narration offered an amalgamation of three popular forms of entertainment—namely film, traditional oral storytelling, and popular literature—which were presented simultaneously for the audience.

Compared with other modes of translation such as subtitling or dubbing, live narration for silent film required no equipment or technology. Only one or two narrators were needed for each screening; however, considering the requirements for a strong command of languages and oral performance skills, it may not have been easy to recruit narrators. Audiences, including the illiterate, were able to understand foreign films, and in this way, the linguistic challenges for theatregoers were significantly lowered. This direct face-to-face contact and enthusiasm from the narrators proved to be highly engaging. They employed dialects, used familiar traditional four-character phrases, adapted words from popular literature, and borrowed traditional storytelling artforms such as *Pingshu*, cross talks, and drum songs. Their creative narration not only enhanced the process of the audience's experience of the foreign, but also enabled them to participate in the film and become part of the film-watching experience.

With the arrival of sound films in the late 1920s, the provision of live narration became comparatively difficult. In sound films, live narration could disturb the audience or distract them from their appreciation of the music and the characters' speech. Therefore, alternative translation modes were experimented with to develop a more cohesive viewing experience.

Film plot sheets

The printing industry was booming in Shanghai in the early twentieth century.²⁵ Cheung and Tsoi describe film plot sheets or handbills as key promotional tools that disseminated screen culture to wider circles, especially for foreign movies glossed for Chinese audiences. They even suggest that the use of handbills, rather than the appearance of sound films, led to the eventual replacement of film narrators.²⁶ I disagree with their view that plot sheets were the reason for the disappearance of film narrators, and propose instead that plot sheets complemented live narration and other modes of translation.

Yoshino discovered that in the 1910s, when the Young Men's Christian Association screened films, film plot sheets were distributed to the public.²⁷ I have collected 65 extant bilingual film plot sheets of foreign films that were distributed in Republican Shanghai, most of which are dated from 1935 to 1949. Plot sheets played an important role as they were used to explain foreign films to Chinese audiences for about three decades, from the 1910s to the 1940s.

²⁵Robert Culp, *The power of print in modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 1.

²⁶Ting Yan Cheung and Pablo Sze-pang Tsoi, 'From an imported novelty to an indigenized practice', in *Early film culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic histories*, (ed.) Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 41–42.

²⁷Sugawara Yoshino, 'The entertainment of understanding: The history of the formation of Chinese film brochures', (trans.) Zhang Yang, *Dangdai Dianyi* [Contemporary Cinema], vol. 35, no.1, 2019, pp. 87–93.

Waterloo Bridge (魂断蓝桥, *hun duan lan qiao*; dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1940) was produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and starred Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh. It tells the love story of a ballet dancer and an army captain who meet by chance on Waterloo Bridge. The film was immensely popular in China, both in the 1940s and the 1980s, largely due to the translations of the film. I collected a plot sheet for *Waterloo Bridge* issued by the Golden Gate Theatre in Shanghai. The one-page plot sheet has two sides, one in English and the other in Chinese. The Chinese side of the sheet is the translated version of the English one, which has been rewritten for Chinese audiences (see Figure 1). First, I note the translation of the film title. The English film title signifies the name of the bridge where the two lovers meet. Translated literally, this name would not mean much to a Chinese audience. Thus, the Chinese title was translated as 魂断蓝桥, which means ‘broken souls at the Blue Bridge’ that alludes to an ancient Chinese love story. In this story, a young Chinese man named Weisheng has an appointment to meet his lover under the Blue Bridge. Weisheng arrives and the water rises. He does not want to break his promise and holds onto the pillar of the bridge to wait for his lover. The water continues to rise and he drowns. This tragic love story was praised by Chinese people for its notion of faithful love, which resonates with the theme of *Waterloo Bridge*.

The English synopsis was translated into classical Chinese, with the addition of poetic expressions. By adding background information to the story, this appropriation allowed Chinese audiences to connect more deeply with the film. In the English version of the film plot sheet, *Waterloo Bridge* opens with the following sentences:

Colonel Roy Cronin is about forty-eight and still handsome. He is on his way to Waterloo Station. He never married, devoting his life to an army career. Nearing the station, he walks out onto the new Waterloo Bridge. There he stands, lost in thought. Between his thumb and fingers twists a tiny charm.

The Chinese version opens differently:

欧战再起, 英军助法, 开拔之日, 有上校罗克劳合 (劳勃泰勒饰), 两鬓白发, 一生尽瘁于戎马生涯, 车过滑铁卢桥, 心有所思, 立即下车, 徘徊桥畔, 不忍离去。(ou zhan zai qi, ying jun zhu fa, kai ba zhi ri, you shang xiao luo ke lao he (lao bo tai le shi), liang bin bai fa, yi sheng jin cui yu rong ma sheng ya, che guo hua tie lu qiao, xin you suo si, li ji xia che, pai huai qiao pan, bu ren li qu) [The war in Europe has started again. The British army is helping the French Army. Colonel Roy Cronin (played by Robert Taylor) with grey hair at his temples, who devoted his whole into a military career. On the day of departure, when he passes the Waterloo Bridge in a vehicle, he has something on his mind and gets out immediately. He wanders around the Bridge and is reluctant to leave.]

In the Chinese version, the translator has added information regarding the war, so that Chinese audiences will have a clearer picture of both the background of the story and which side of the war the hero fights for. The English source text describes Roy Cronin as ‘about forty-eight and still handsome’. However, the Chinese version does not mention his age or his appearance. Instead, Cronin is described as having ‘两鬓白发 (*liang bin bai fa*) [grey hair at his temples]’, a commonly used four-character

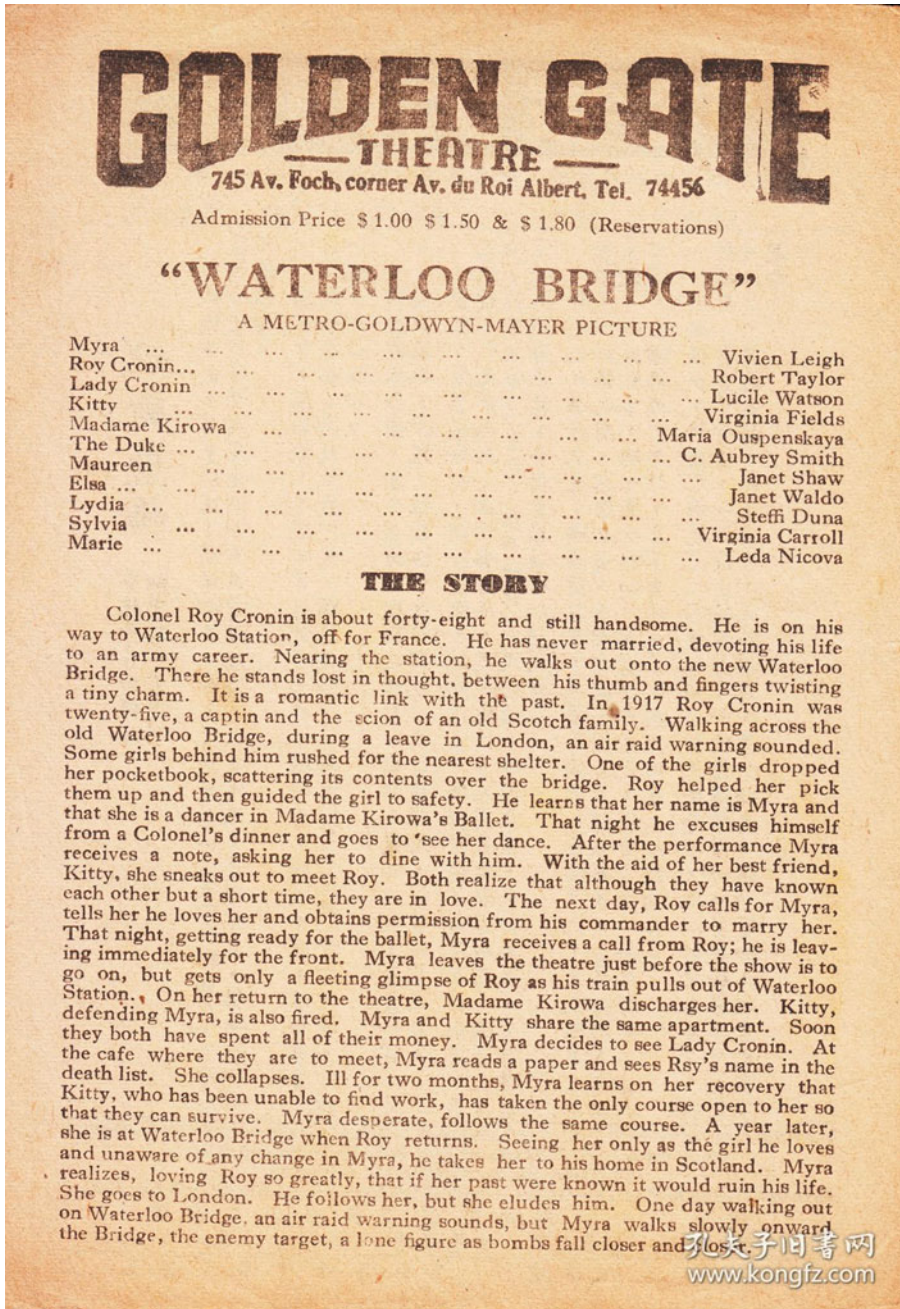


Figure 1. A plot sheet of *Waterloo Bridge*, released by the Golden Gate theatre in the 1930s. Source: Author's personal collection.

金四大大戲院

地址法租界福照路亞爾培路口 電話七四四六五
(定價座券) 一元五角 一元八角 一元

魂斷藍橋

本院每片加譯詳細中文字幕說明

歐戰再起，英軍助法，開拔之日，有上校羅克勞合(勞勃泰勒飾)，兩鬢白髮，一生盡瘁于戎馬生涯，車過滑鐵盧橋，心有所思，立即下車，徘徊橋畔，不忍離去。

思往事，愁如織，不堪回首舊時情，二十餘年前，歐戰方酣，勞合身膺上尉，微步過橋，適遇敵機空襲，邂逅避難少女瑪拉(費文麗飾)于防空壕，情絲一縷，兩心相印。

瑪拉隸歌舞團，某夕勞特往觀瑪之舞劇，劇終，邀女出遊，歡盡一宵，翌日，向女求婚，女允，惟因格于法律不能于三時後結婚，僅能延至來日。

當晚，勞忽奉命今，調防前線，離瑪遠去，瑪得信後，趕往車站相送，車已開行，不見伊人面，徒呼奈何天，返戲院後，又因棄職私離劇團，為團主革除，同事凱蒂(浮琴尼，弗而特飾)代瑪辯護，亦遭去職，衣食無着，生計維艱，女忽得勞來信，今與其母相晤以助彼渡生。

會見之日勞母來遲，瑪偶閱報章，見勞已殉國，暈倒于地，及至醒來，勞母亦至，斷腸之痛，啓齒乏術，勞母亦憤然別去。謀事無成，告貸無門，勢迫為妓，以渡餘生，瑪之衷情誰知，不意勞實未死，僅受重傷，痊癒歸來，重返故鄉，重晤瑪拉于車站，喜不自勝，于是攜女回家，以謀結合。

結始佳夕，瑪因已污之身，不願有玷勞合光榮勳績，迺以始末告勞母，情然遠引，自盡于滑橋，一坯殘土掩伊身，一縷情魂繫君心。勞亦鬱鬱終生，情遠矣。車過藍橋，觸景生情，成仁殉國，男兒壯志，魂今有知，相會之期不

Reservations can be held ONLY in 15 minutes before advertised time of programme
Seats for \$ 1.00, 1.50 can be held only by being occupied!
Children will be admitted at full price

Records Played in this Theatre are Supplied by Lyra Music House, 897 Av. Joffre,
鐘分五十前映開至留保祇座定：意注

票全律一童兒留代能不坐隨到隨位座半元孔夫子圖書網
八四二三八話電 印承館務印華天 www.kongfz.com

Figure 1. (Continued.)

phrase for an aged person. The sentence 'Between his thumb and fingers twists a tiny charm' is not rendered in Chinese, perhaps because this description may appear

to be strange and insignificant in Chinese. Moreover, the Chinese version adds that Roy Cronin was played by Robert Taylor, an American film star who was popular in Shanghai, to increase the appeal of the film. The English version ends with Myra's suicide. The final sentences in the English synopsis describe this:

Myra realizes, loving Roy so greatly, that if her past were known it would ruin his life. She goes to London. He follows her, but she eludes him. One day, walking out on Waterloo Bridge, an air-raid warning sounds, but Myra walks slowly onward the bridge, the enemy target, a lone figure as the bombs fall closer and closer.

However, following the depiction of Myra's death, the Chinese translation continues with the translator's lamentation and imagining of their love and Roy's feelings:

一坏残土掩伊身，一缕情魂动君心。劳亦郁郁终生，寡身以居。车过蓝桥，触景生情。成仁殉国，男儿壮志，魂兮有知，相会之期不远矣。(yī pi cān tǔ yǎn yī shēn, yī lǚ qíng hún dòng jūn xīn. lǎo yì yù zhōng shēng, guā shēn yì jū. chē guò lán qiáo, chù jǐng shēng qíng. chéng rén xùn guó, nán ér zhuàng zhì, hún xī yǒu zhī, xiāng huì zhī qī bù yuǎn yì) [Her body was covered in earth and her spirit touched his soul. Roy was sad for his life and remained single. When his vehicle passed the blue bridge, the sight stirred up his feelings. Dying for one's country was the ambition of men. If the soul knows it, the day of reunion is not far.]

Two seven-character poetic sentences are added in the translation to acclaim Myra's death. Moreover, the Confucian value of '仁 (*ren*) [benevolence]' is used to describe Roy's determination to die fighting on the battlefield, and to make him more appealing to a Chinese audience: as a '君子 (*junzi*) [a man of moral integrity]', he is praised for his Confucian values. In doing so, the Chinese synopsis depicts a story that is familiar and attractive to Chinese audiences and explains Roy's behaviour by referencing traditional Chinese ethical values.

Plot sheets provided the audience with a general idea of the film's story before they viewed the film, allowing them to enter its narrative world; the plot sheets may also have been reread during and after the viewing. In addition, the printed plot sheets extended the viewing experience beyond cinemas to readers who did not or could not watch the films in the cinema. They were able to savour the film and enjoy a modern foreign experience through the medium of paper and potentially become a cinema goer in the future. It is worth noting the statement on the Chinese film plot of *Waterloo Bridge*, which says: 'in our cinema, film screening is accompanied with detailed Chinese subtitles for illustration'. It shows that film plot sheets and other translation modes such as subtitling were complementary. The written language of most film plot sheets consisted of half-classical and half-vernacular Chinese, which aligned the film more with literature and was quite different from the vernacular local dialects employed by the film narrators. The narrators' translation was more direct and catered for both literate and illiterate audiences in the theatres, whereas the bilingual film plot sheets served only the literate audience. The illiterate audience relied upon their literate companions for a fuller understanding of the foreign medium. Unlike those audiences with film narrators, who would make sounds to match the images on screen, it was rare for audiences with film plot sheets to be so directly engaged with the film.

Subtitling

In the silent era, films gradually developed from the ‘cinema of attractions’ to narrative cinema.²⁸ With increasingly complicated plots, it became more and more challenging for Chinese audiences without sufficient English language skills to understand films. In the era of sound, as noticed by Bao and Brennan, the introduction of synchronized sound in the late 1920s also posed a new challenge for Hollywood and other foreign films owing to the cost of sound film production and projection, and the demand for the translation of dialogue.²⁹ Díaz Cintas and Remael define subtitling as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that aims to translate the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as any other information that might be conveyed in the source language on the soundtrack and any discursive elements that appear in the image.³⁰ In China, several subtitling methods were experimented with in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, and some of them were different from their definition. For technical and cost reasons, subtitles were often projected on an adjacent screen, instead of appearing in the lower part of the screen.³¹

Chinese distributors also experimented with the addition of Chinese subtitles to the prints of foreign language films. The Peacock Film Company, founded by Zhou Ziqi, the former acting president of the Republic of China in 1923, was the first distribution company in China to do so.³² Zhou planned to distribute foreign films in China after adding Chinese translations to the films. His purpose was two-fold: first, to increase the sale of foreign films and, secondly, to educate Chinese people through the use of Chinese words in films.³³ Cheng Shuren (also known as S. J. Benjamin Cheng), who had studied in the United States, was invited by Zhou Ziqi to join the Peacock Film Company to work as the assistant to Mr. F. V. Chamberlin, the company’s general manager. One of Cheng’s priorities was to translate over 20 outstanding American films.³⁴ Cheng’s translations received positive reviews from audiences. A review of *Poor Men’s Wives* (穷人之妻, *qiong ren zhi qi*; dir. Louis J. Gasnier, 1923) stated:

The Chinese translation was excellent, which can even convey what the English words cannot convey and add new meaning to the film, so that the audience can

²⁸Tom Gunning, ‘The cinema of attraction[s]: Early film, its spectator and the avant-garde’, in *The cinema of attractions reloaded*, (ed.) Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 381–388.

²⁹Weihong Bao and Nathaniel Brennan, ‘Cinema, propaganda, and networks of experience: Exhibiting Chongqing cinema in New York’, in *American and Chinese-language cinemas: Examining cultural flows*, (eds) Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 129–145.

³⁰Jorge Díaz Cintas and Aline Remael, *Audiovisual translation: Subtitling* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 8.

³¹Haina Jin, ‘Introduction: The translation and dissemination of Chinese cinemas’, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2018, pp. 197–202.

³²Ibid.

³³Anonymous, ‘Kong que ying pian gong si qing xing zai mei fa biao [The situation of Peacock Company was released in the United States]’, *Shenbao*, 19 April 1923.

³⁴Cheng Shuren, ‘Dao yan hong lou meng zhi yi fan yong xin [My thoughts on directing *The Dream of the Red Mansions*]’, *Kong que te kan hong lou meng zhuan hao* [Special Peacock Issue of *The Dream of the Red Mansions*], vol. 2, no. 2, 1927, p. 5.

understand at one glance. It can only be done by a translator who is proficient in both Chinese and English literature.³⁵

A review of another foreign film *All the Brothers Were Valiant* (难兄难弟, *nan xiong nan di*; dir. Ralph Ince, 1926) reveals that the translation used a lively and readable standard of modern Chinese instead of classical Chinese as well as punctuation marks, which enhanced its readability.³⁶ Cheng wrote that, 'One of the driving forces for us to add Chinese subtitles to foreign films was to accelerate the production of domestic films. The foreign films with both Chinese and English languages were exhibited in major cities in China and were highly praised by people from all walks of life.'³⁷ The review showed that the purpose of translation was not only to support the Chinese audience's comprehension of foreign films, but also to nurture the Chinese film industry and accelerate the production of Chinese films. Cheng himself later directed two films and acted as screenwriter and cinematographer for three more films.

The addition of film subtitles required special equipment and technical skills. The words were first written by a calligrapher and photographed by a camera, and were then used to replace the original intertitle cards of the foreign films. The addition of these Chinese intertitle cards was costly for film distributors and exhibitors.

Inspired by the lantern lectures, theatres in Shanghai began to experiment with using projectors to show the subtitles of a foreign film on an adjacent screen. In May 1926, the newly established Odeon Theatre in Shanghai advertised its new plan:

Mr. Chen, the owner of the Odeon Theatre plans to install a small screen under the big screen to project the Chinese translation of English intertitles in American films, so that audiences who do not understand English can appreciate the films better. It was tried out on May 1st, 1926, and the results were satisfactory. Persons in charge of this matter were Gui Zhongshu (also known as Kuei Chung-shu or Chung-shu Kwei) and Lu Mengshu.³⁸

Like Cheng Shuren, Gui Zhongshu had also graduated from Tsinghua College (later Tsinghua University) and studied in the United States. Following this, he worked in the United States for a few years as a journalist and editor for newspapers and contributed to *The New York Times* and *The New York Evening Post*. He returned to China in 1927 and worked as a managing editor for *The China Critic* and later as editor-in-chief of *China's Yearbook*, and also as an editorial writer for the China Press in 1935. Apart from working as an editor and writer, he was much involved in the film business with roles including: assistant to the treasurer of the Peacock Motion Picture Corporation, New York, from 1922 to 1925; assistant sales manager for the Odeon Theatre Shanghai, from 1925 to 1930; and sales manager for Paramount Films of China, Shanghai, from 1930 to 1932.³⁹

³⁵Anonymous, 'Guan qiong ren zhi qi ying pian hou zhi gan xiang [Opinions after viewing of *Poor Men's Wives*]', *Shenbao*, 17 July 1923.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Peacock Film Company, 'Autobiographies of staff at Peacock Film Company', *Peacock Special Issue*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1926.

³⁸Anonymous, 'Ao di an zhi xin ji hua [New plan of Odeon Theatre]', *Shenbao*, 2 May 1926.

³⁹Chung-shu Kwei, <https://prabook.com/web/chung-shu.kwei/3714227>, [accessed 4 March 2024].

Lu Mengshu was a film critic and novelist, and also editor-in-chief for several popular film journals in the 1920s and 1930s, including *Silver Star* (Yin xing, 1926–1928), *Film Magazine* (Ying xi za zhi, 1929–1931), *The Eight Art* (Di ba yi shu, 1929), and *Film Monthly* (Dian ying yue kan, 1930–1933).⁴⁰ In those magazines, foreign film reviews and news of foreign films were translated and introduced. Gui Zhongshu and Lu Mengshu possessed a good knowledge of English and were experienced journalists and editors. Their cosmopolitan background enabled them to experiment with this new method of film translation.

The use of a projector to show Chinese translations alongside the screening soon became a popular method for screening foreign films in other cinemas in Shanghai. In 1931, the Donghai Theatre also advertised for an experienced projectionist who could translate English subtitles into Chinese and write the titles onto glass sheets. The projector was able to simultaneously show the sheets alongside the English subtitles.⁴¹ In order to respond to the call to popularize the national language, and avoid the excessive use of foreign languages, the Film Examination Committee (constituted by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) issued an order that from 1 July 1933, foreign films being shown in China were to add Chinese subtitles to the print. However, considering the technical difficulties involved in this, theatres were allowed to use projected Chinese translations alongside the screening instead. The translations for the projection were also to be sent to the Film Examination Committee for review. Once the translations had been approved, they were not to be deleted or changed.⁴²

The use of projected translations during screening provided information to the audience while they were viewing the films. Theatregoers were able to view the film without a film narrator's intercession. However, with the development of narrative cinema, and the introduction of sound cinema in particular, a film often contained several hundred or even over a thousand lines of dialogues. It became quite difficult for a projectionist to follow the pace of the film. In addition, the translations were often projected onto the adjacent small screen. The audience was required to view two screens at once, and the subtitles on the small screen could be difficult to read, particularly for the audience members in the back rows.

This method continued to be used in the era of sound. For very important productions, Hollywood studios would print the translated Chinese subtitles onto the sound films and send them to China. Paramount was the first to do so, followed by MGM.⁴³ However, due to the cost of this, the number of films with Chinese subtitles printed by Hollywood studios was quite limited. For less important productions, Chinese distributors and exhibitors would project the translation onto an adjacent screen or hire professionals to add Chinese subtitles to the prints.

Subtitling allowed a literate audience to understand the narratives of films, and to hear the original dialogue without other distracting sounds. However, this method also

⁴⁰Zhang Hua, 'Xin ying xiong zhu yi ying ju si chao shi mo [The beginning and the end of "new heroism" in film and drama] (1926–1928)', *Dianying Pingjie* [Film Review], vol. 21, 2021, pp. 36–41.

⁴¹Donghai Theatre, 'Dong hai da xi yuan zhao qing da huan deng pian ren yuan yi wei [Donghai Theatre intends to recruit a projector]', *Shenbao*, 11 September 1931.

⁴²Dian ying jian cha wei yuan hui [The Central Film Examination Committee], 'Zhong yang dian ying jian cha wei yuan hui gong bao [Notice by the Central Film Examination Committee]', 29 June 1933.

⁴³Anonymous, 'Ji le pai la meng zhi hou, mi gao mei jia hua wen zi mu' [After Paramount, MGM adds Chinese subtitles], *Daisheng*, vol. 7, no.15, 1938, p. 295.

had its shortcomings, as it only catered for a literate audience, and thus did not meet the needs of an illiterate audience; they had to rely on their literate friends to read the subtitles for them, which could be disturbing for other audience members.

Miss Earphone

In September 1939, He Tingran, the founder of Asia Theatres, planned to introduce *Fragrant Concubine* (Xiang fei), a Chinese film directed by Zhu Shilin, to foreign distributors at a banquet organized by a Shanghai cinema circle. Considering that foreign distributors did not understand Chinese dialogue, He asked a Ms Nie to interpret the film during the screening. Due to her outstanding performance, foreign distributors became very interested in the film.⁴⁴ A. R. Hager, the general manager of Asia Theatres, was much inspired by this event. At that time, simultaneous interpretation equipment had been used in the conference rooms of the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva. He ordered similar equipment from American suppliers and installed it in the Grand Theatre. In the 1,900 seat theatre, more than 200 seats were equipped with simultaneous interpretation devices. The audience was able to rent a set of earphones for an extra fee, which would allow them to hear the simultaneous interpretation of the film during the screening. Because the audience members needed to rent earphones to access this service, and because most of the interpreters were female, newspapers referred to this group of interpreters as 'Miss Earphone'.

On 4 November 1939, *The Return of the Cisco Kid* (风流奇侠传, *feng liu qi xia zhuan*; dir. Herbert I. Leeds, 1939) premiered in Shanghai's Grand Theatre with just such a service.⁴⁵ Ms Liu and Ms Nie were hired as Miss Earphones and provided the interpretation service for the audience. They not only interpreted every sentence of the film, but they matched their tone with the scenes in the film. During the fades in and out, they also provided simple introductions to the plot or to the characters.⁴⁶ Following the premiere, the Grand Theatre also organized an introduction to the new technology and the two interpreters, and invited Zhou Shoujuan and Yan Duhe, who were renowned journalists and writers, to join their discussion. The audience was amazed by the talents of the two interpreters, as well as their beauty and youth. Ms Nie was a descendant of a famous official of the late Qing dynasty and had graduated from Yenching University. Ms Liu had graduated from the University of Shanghai, a Baptist institution.⁴⁷ Following the first successful public screening with simultaneous interpretation, other cinemas in Shanghai followed suit, particularly the first-run theatres, such as the Nanjing Theatre, Big Shanghai Theatre, Lido Theatre, and Guotai Theatre, owned by Asian Theatres, where the newest films appeared before they were shown at the cheaper theatres. The Miss Earphone role became a highly paid job. Most of the Miss Earphone interpreters were in their twenties, had graduated from Christian

⁴⁴Anonymous, 'Shi yong yi yi feng de miao yong [The wonderful use of earphone]', *Zhongguo Yingxun*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1940, p. 29.

⁴⁵Anonymous, 'Ying yuan zhi chuang ju yi yi feng shi yan cheng gong [Invention of the cinema: About the trial listening of earphone]', *Xinwenbao*, 5 November 1939.

⁴⁶Hua, 'Yi yi fengshi ting ji [The new trial of earphone]', *Shenbao*, 5 November 1939.

⁴⁷Xiaosu, 'Kan wai guo pian shi ting yi yi feng [Listening to earphones while watching foreign films for the first time]', *Libao*, 5 November 1939.

colleges, and were typical representations of 'the new woman' advocated by modern society. The Grand Theatre's recruitment of the first group of Miss Earphones noted three requirements: fluency in English speaking and listening, fluency in standard Mandarin, and interpretation skills. From over 200 applicants, only Ms Nie, Ms Liu, and Ms Bao, another university graduate, passed the written test, the interview, and the oral interpretation test and went on to become the first group of Miss Earphones.

Ma Li, a Miss Earphone, wrote about her working experience as a simultaneous interpreter in cinema. She identified her role as being an ambassador for Hollywood in China. Before the official screening of each film, Miss Earphones often viewed the trial screening. Most film companies would send the scripts along with the films and Miss Earphones were able to review the scripts. However, there were instances where scripts were not provided and the Miss Earphones would have to rely upon what they heard in the film.⁴⁸ Ma Li described the role of Miss Earphone as the art of combining film, drama, and public speaking. Throughout her interpretation, she would identify herself with each character. She would not only translate dialogue, but also speak every sentence as vividly and powerfully as each character in the film. Because the audience could not understand the original voices of the characters, she became the intermediary for them. The joy and sorrow felt by the characters was conveyed to the audience through her.⁴⁹ She also described her working booth, which was much like the simultaneous interpretation booth of today. Among Hollywood stars, she admired Ingrid Bergman and Leslie Howard, because of their outstanding performances and their clear pronunciation.⁵⁰

Being a Miss Earphone became one of the most highly paid professional jobs for Chinese women in Republican Shanghai. As well as translation, their role was to convey plots, dialogues, and other important content of foreign films in standard Mandarin, alongside the film screening, into the earphones of the audience, through modern simultaneous interpretation equipment. They demonstrated Chinese cinemas' reaction to sound cinema, and greatly helped Chinese audiences to understand and appreciate sound foreign films. Interestingly, audiences pointed out two other benefits from listening to earphone interpretation: the first related to learning standard Mandarin. After listening to fluent and standard Mandarin, more people sought to communicate in this language. The other benefit related to learning English. The audience could listen to English sentences and their simultaneous interpretation at the same time.⁵¹ A standard national language is often a symbol of a modern national state and to learn English in Republican Shanghai also demonstrated openness to foreign culture.

In 1941, following Shanghai's occupation by the Japanese, American and British films were no longer allowed to be screened in Shanghai. First-run theatres like the Grand Theatre, Nanjing, Guotai, and Meiqi only screened Chinese films, while Dahua screened only Japanese films. Among them, only the Grand Theatre, Nanjing, and Dahua provided earphone equipment. The Grand Theatre and Nanjing began to interpret Chinese films in Japanese using earphone equipment, so that Japanese audiences

⁴⁸Ma Li, 'Hao lai wu zhu hua dai yan ren: wo zuo yi yi feng bo yuan [Ambassador of Hollywood in China: I am an earphone broadcaster]', *Jia* [Home], vol. 23, 1947, pp. 436–437, 445.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Shi, 'Chuan sheng tong [Megaphone]', *Ya zhou ying xun* [Asia Film News], vol. 3, no. 1, 1941.

could understand these films, and Dahua interpreted Japanese films in Chinese.⁵² However, due to the bleak state of business, this service did not continue for long. Following the Second World War, Hollywood films became popular in Shanghai once more, with most first-run theatres installed with earphone equipment. In addition, this practice was adopted by other cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Suzhou.

Compared with previous film narrators, Miss Earphones were provided with modern equipment and technology, and could provide more simultaneous translation to audiences without disturbing them. Different from film narrators who often stood next to the screen and were visible during the screening, Miss Earphones worked in their booths, and thus the audience could only hear their voices and could not see them. This invisibility also allowed the audience to have a more concentrated viewing experience. In addition, while live narrators spoke in dialects, Miss Earphones spoke in standard Mandarin, the language vigorously promoted by the nationalist government with its vision for a modern Chinese nation.

To provide this service, cinemas were required to install simultaneous interpretation equipment, with audiences paying an additional fee to rent the earphones. For some, Miss Earphones' voices could be a distraction. Cinemas noticed that their audiences had preferences for different translation modes, and they even made different translation modes available at the same time for one film. Judging from advertisements in newspapers, it was not unusual for a film to provide both an earphone translation service and Chinese subtitles. In this way, audiences who preferred not to hear different voices at the same time could choose not to use earphone translation services and still enjoy the film.

Voiceover and dubbing

Following the beginning of the Pacific War (1941–1945), the United States and China formed an alliance. The Hamon Foundation sponsored the Chinese translation of American documentaries concerning China's involvement in the Second World War. Li Lili, a well-known Chinese actress, and Sun Yu, an established Chinese film director, were invited to the United States to translate and dub these documentaries.⁵³ Following the Second World War, American films were once more able to be screened at scale in China. In order to reach audiences whose English language skills were insufficient, apart from adding Chinese subtitles to films, American films experimented with a new technology. MGM added a Chinese voiceover to explain the dialogue in their films. When the film was screened, the audience was able to hear the sound of the Chinese voiceover and the English dialogue, as well as the original sound effects. The first film to add a Chinese voiceover was *Tarzan's Adventure in New York*, which was shown at the Dahua Theatre.⁵⁴ The reaction from the audience was mixed. A film review appreciated this practice because it was similar to providing an earphone service on screen while removing the need for Shanghai audiences to spend

⁵²Anonymous, 'San ying yuan yi de feng zhong ri yu dui yi [Earphones services at three theatres: Translation between Chinese and Japanese]', *Shenbao*, 25 January 1943.

⁵³Sun Yu, *Yin hai fan zhouhui yi wo de yi sheng* [Afloat on the silver sea: Recalling my life] (Shanghai: Arts and Literature Press, 1987), p. 152.

⁵⁴Mi Mei, 'Tai shan dao niu yue quan bu guo yu dui bai [*Tarzan's Adventure in New York* all dubbed into Chinese]', *He ping ri bao* [Peace Daily], 11 October 1946.

extra money renting earphones. Audiences in cinemas without the earphone service could hear the Chinese translation.⁵⁵ However, watching such a film and listening to the mixed languages and sound could be very distracting for the audience. Mr Luo, MGM's representative, revealed two future plans of the company: the first was to add local language voiceovers to films; the second was to make 16 mm smaller films. He also discussed the reception of *Tarzan's Adventure in New York*. The use of Chinese dialogue was heavily promoted by the theatres. However, the audience was disappointed because the English dialogue did not replace Chinese. Instead, a third-person narration was added to explain part of the dialogue. The Chinese narration could not match the lip movements of the characters. Mr Luo reported this as a failure to MGM. He stated that the practice was not suitable for Shanghai, because the audience there possessed a certain level of English knowledge, and the essence of literary films lay in their dialogue. With only a rough Chinese narration, the original meaning of the film would be lost and the audience would lose interest. However, MGM headquarters were still considering this method, because it could attract audiences who did not understand English and increase the sale of the films.⁵⁶

An interview with Mr He Qitian, the vice general manager of the Asia Theatres Company and director of the council of film industries in Shanghai, revealed that the Hollywood studios intended to build studios in Shanghai to provide Chinese subtitling and dubbing services for Hollywood films. The two reasoned that the current translations, performed by overseas Chinese speakers in the United States, could not meet the needs of Chinese audiences. For example, Tyrone Power was known as 泰羅飽華 (Tai luo bao hua) to audiences in Shanghai. However, when his name was translated to 太倫寶爾 (Tai lun bao er), no-one recognized him. It was necessary to set up local studios in China so that both the Chinese dubbing and subtitling could follow the linguistic habits of the Chinese audience, so that the translations would not be ridiculous.⁵⁷ Voiceover and dubbing had been employed by both American and Soviet film companies as an important method for winning over the Chinese market. Sovexportfilm dubbed *Zoya* (dir. Lev Arnestham, 1944), *The Ballad of Siberia* (dir. Ivan Pyryev, 1948), and *The Stone Flower* (dir. Aleksandr Ptushko, 1946) into Chinese.⁵⁸ In his film review on *The Ballad of Siberia* (dir. Ivan Pyryev, 1948), Wang wrote that 'the Chinese dubbing is not an appropriate translation method. When a person with blue eyes and red hair speaks standard Chinese, the audience would find it ridiculous in many serious scenes, no matter how well he or she speaks.'⁵⁹

⁵⁵Huoyu, 'Tai shan dao niu yue kai ying zhi ri: dui xi pian zhong jia guo yu shuo ming you gan [The premier of *Tarzan Adventure in New York*: My opinions on adding Chinese explanation in Western film]', *Wenwu Zhoukan* [Culture and Entertainment Weekly], vol. 1, no. 40, 1947, p. 5.

⁵⁶Anonymous, 'Se qing ge wu pian yi cheng guo qu hao lai wu zhuan bian zuo feng jia cha fang yan dui bai wei shou huan ying xiao xing ying pian liao jiang shen ru nong cun [Erotic musicals became the past. Hollywood has changed its way of doing business. Adding local dialogues were not welcomed, small films will reach the countryside]', *Shenbao*, 7 November 1946.

⁵⁷Han Jianqin, 'Tou shi yi wu nan wang de wen hua jia zhi [The cultural value of *A Romantic Adventure*]', *Yingyin*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1948, pp. 10–11.

⁵⁸Tina Mai Chen, 'Socialist geographies, internationalist temporalities and travelling film technologies: Sino-Soviet film exchange in the 1950s and 1960s', in *Futures of Chinese cinema: Technologies and temporalities in Chinese screen cultures*, (eds) Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 81.

⁵⁹Anonymous, 'Su lian xuan li wu cai yin le pian sen lin zhi qu pi pan jie shao guan gan [On the ballad of Siberia, a soviet film: criticism, introduction and review]', *Dian ying za zhi* [Film Magazine] vol. 35, 1949, pp. 5–6.

Wang Wentao, an Italian Chinese, also led the Chinese dubbing of *Una Romantica Avventura* (*A Romantic Adventure*, 一舞难忘, *yi wu nan wang*; dir. Mario Camerini, 1940). According to Wang, the process of applying Chinese dubbing in standard Mandarin lasted ten months and required hundreds of experiments. First, the length of each sentence was recorded. Second, the Chinese translation and lip synchronicity was created. Third, roles were assigned to voice actors, who were required to rehearse many times.⁶⁰ The original dialogue was edited out and every sentence was dubbed into Chinese. The dubbing was done by Chinese students in Italy. The film was previewed in Shanghai in October 1947. The commercial counsellor of the Italian embassy in Shanghai also attended the preview and praised it as follows, 'the dubbing was excellent. It is really an honour for an Italian film to be dubbed into Chinese.'⁶¹ Apart from screening in cinemas in Shanghai, the Chinese dubbing of *Una Romantica Avventura* was used by the Capital Catholic Church to entertain government officials.⁶² Wang's translation method, which involved the dubbing of every Italian sentence, was highly praised by the audience and Wang was encouraged to dub Chinese films into foreign languages for an open international market.⁶³ Compared with film narration, the techniques of subtitling, film plot sheets, Miss Earphones, voiceovers, and dubbing were able to cater to the widest possible audiences, both literate and illiterate. In the case of voiceover and dubbing, the pronunciation of the target language, Chinese, became a critical issue. The employment of overseas dubbing actors providing accented Chinese voiceovers, employed by MGM and Sovexportfilm, was not so well received and even criticized by audiences in Shanghai. However, the method of replacing the sound of each foreign dialogue sentence with the sound of Chinese sentences, using lip synchrony in standard Mandarin (as shown in the Chinese dubbing of *Una Romantica Avventura*), was applauded by the audiences.

Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, foreign films were introduced to China and gradually became popular with Chinese audiences. Their acceptance and popularity were achieved through the mediation of various modes of translation, including live narration, film plot sheets, subtitling, simultaneous interpretation, voiceover, and dubbing.

These translation modes did not occur successively in a linear order. Instead, they were complementary. Newspaper advertisements often advertised that a foreign film would be shown with different translation modes in different theatres, or even with a mixed use of different translation modes at one exhibition. The modes of film translation used were conditioned by the availability of technological equipment, financial

⁶⁰Han, 'The cultural value of *A Romantic Adventure*', pp. 10–11.

⁶¹Anonymous, 'Wang wen tao fa ming guo yu pei yin ying pian [Wang Wentao invented Chinese dubbing]', *Shenbao*, 15 October 1947.

⁶²Anonymous, 'Fang ying yi wu nan wang, zhao dai zheng fu guan zhang [A party to remember was screened to entertain governmental officials]', *Taiguang*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1948, p. 34.

⁶³Yingwu, 'Xi pian pei guo yu dui bai yi wu nan wang shi zhi cheng gong guo pian zheng qu guo wai shi chang qi zai bu yuan [To match Western films with Chinese dialogues: The dubbing of *A Romantic Adventure* was successful, and a bright future for Chinese films to earn international market]', *Yingjuren*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1947, p. 1.

capacities, and translation talents available to distribution companies or cinemas. In addition, different audiences possessed different preferences to translation methods.

In the discussion of the global success of Hollywood cinema, Hansen remarked:

[T]he films themselves were also changed in that process. Many films were literally changed, both for particular export markets and by censorship, marketing, and programming practices in the countries in which they were shown, not to mention practices of dubbing and subtitling.⁶⁴

Indeed, the various translation modes employed in the Chinese market changed the nature of foreign films, making both the films and Chinese audience more cosmopolitan. Live narration, simultaneous interpretation, voiceover, and dubbing used Chinese voices to translate foreign films, with film plot sheets and subtitling using written Chinese words to explain or translate them. While sound could cater for both a literate and an illiterate audience, written words could only be understood by literate audiences. In those translation processes, the foreign and the local were mixed together in a visual or audio mode and transformed the foreign medium into something that could be understood, participated in, and even utilized by Chinese audiences. As stated by Cheng Shuren and his fellow translators, the purpose of foreign film translation concerned not only the accessibility of foreign films to Chinese audiences, but also the acceleration of Chinese film production. Under the influence of the translated foreign films, cinema-going became a common Chinese leisure activity, and in the 1920s, the Chinese national cinema began to take shape. Chinese filmmakers also translated their films into English, among other languages, via bilingual intertitles and showed them to international audiences.⁶⁵ The translation experiments in Shanghai in the early twentieth century signify the origins of cinematic modernity in China.

The legacy of this cosmopolitan cinematic practice is widely present today. Foreign films that are released in China are often translated into two different versions—a Chinese subtitled version and a Chinese dubbed version—to cater for the different preferences and needs of Chinese audiences.⁶⁶ Both translation modes have been inherited and developed from the early experiments with subtitling, voiceover, and dubbing. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, those translators who worked in state-owned film translation studios were able to continue the early explorations in film translation and dubbing became the predominant translation mode from 1949 to 1994. Film narration and oral interpretation were widely used in translating films for ethnic minority audiences in Maoist China, and are still used in the production of accessible films for the visually impaired. Chinese webpages of foreign films have become the modern version of film plot sheets. Fansub groups work tirelessly and voluntarily to provide Chinese subtitles for foreign films and audiovisual products. In our digital age, these translation modes continue to connect Chinese audiences at home with the world, at a higher rate and a faster speed than ever before.

⁶⁴Miriam Hansen, 'Fallen women, rising stars, new horizons: Shanghai silent film as vernacular modernism', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 10–22.

⁶⁵Haina Jin, 'Intertitle translation of Chinese silent films', *Babel*, vol. 66, no. 45, pp. 719–732.

⁶⁶Haina Jin and Yves Gambier, 'Audiovisual translation in China: A dialogue between Yves Gambier and Jin Haina', *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26–39.

Acknowledgements. This research is supported by the China National Social Science Major Research Project 'A general history of film translation in China' (Grant number: 20 and ZD313) and 'The fundamental research funds for the central universities'. I am especially thankful to the organizers of two online conferences: 'Cosmopolitan pasts of China and the Eurasian world' and the UKCHA Annual Conference 2022 where this article was presented and discussed. Collegial appreciation is extended to the guest editors and the peer reviewers of this journal for their constructive and insightful suggestions.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Haina Jin is a professor of translation, film, and communication studies at the Communication University of China. Her research interests include film translation, translation history, and film history. She is the chair of and researcher for the China National Social Science Foundation Major Research Project 'A general history of film translation in China'. She has published a monograph *Towards a History of Translating Chinese Films (1905-1949)* and is now working on a sequel, which will cover the 120-year history of film translation in China. She is the translator of the three-volume *General History of Chinese Film* (Routledge, 2022).

Cite this article: Jin, Haina. 2025. 'The translation of foreign films and cosmopolitan Shanghai (1896-1949)'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X24000039>