Translation of English Film Titles into Chinese: A Pragmatic and Socio-Cultural Adaptation Perspective

Xiaojing Hu[1], Hazlina Abdul Halim[1], Zaid Mohd Zin[1]

[1] Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Correspondence: Hazlina Abdul Halim, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: hazlina_ah@upm.edu.my

Abstract

Film titles serve as the initial point of engagement between films and their audiences, playing a pivotal role in shaping expectations and supporting promotion efforts. These titles often carry distinct cultural meanings and linguistic nuances that encapsulate the film's essence, making their translation a complex task requiring creativity and strategic decision-making. Hence, translators need to balance fidelity to the original with sensitivity to the cultural and communicative norms of the target audience. Given its importance, there is a need to explore the features of film titles and the translation strategies. While numerous studies have been given to the translation of film titles from various theoretical standpoints, limited attention has been given to the translation of film titles through the framework of adaptation theory. This paper investigates the translation strategies of English film titles into Chinese through the lens of Volkova and Zubenina's (2015) pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation theory. By analyzing selected titles from IMDb and their Chinese counterparts on Douban, the study offers insights into how pragmatic and socio-cultural features shape adaptation strategies, enhancing translators' awareness in cross-cultural audiovisual translation. This study hopes to contribute to the burgeoning field of titleology by highlighting how adaptation functions at the intersection of translation, culture, and audience engagement. Ultimately, the findings are anticipated to offer practical insights for translators and enrich our understanding of the socio-pragmatic dimensions involved in cross-cultural audiovisual translation.

Keywords: film title, translation strategies, socio-cultural adaptation, pragmatic adaptation

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly expanded the global reach and influence of the film industry. As international audiences grow, the importance of effectively localizing films, particularly through their titles, has become more evident. According to the Motion Picture Association of America (2017), over 70% of Hollywood's box office revenue comes from the overseas market. Among these, China has emerged as the most profitable market for Hollywood films, with the highest global box office revenue being achieved in 2018 (Yiu, 2018). Furthermore, whenever a company introduces a product into a foreign market, one of its critical market entry decisions is the choice of a local brand name so that it resonates (Zhang & Schmitt, 2001). Movies constitute a mass culture product; they are designed to please what is deemed to be an undifferentiated audience (Garth, 1980). In today's fast-paced and media-saturated society, where audiences are presented with an overwhelming number of film choices—whether in cinemas or via streaming platforms such as Netflix and IMDb—the importance of a compelling film title is even more pronounced. Film title serves not only as an identifier, but equally as a persuasive tool. As Darwish (2022, p.105) notes, titles are crafted to convey a film's essence through ambiguity or emotional resonance, sparking curiosity that motivates viewers to watch.

In international markets, a film title can significantly affect its reception. A well-chosen film can enhance visibility, boost popularity, and contribute directly to box office success. Conversely, a poorly translated or culturally incongruent title may alienate audiences and negatively impact potential revenue (Paul, 2009). With the entertainment industry now operating on a global scale, film titles have become powerful instruments of cross-cultural communication. They are not only marketing devices but also bearers of cultural meaning, often requiring careful adaptation to ensure relevance and resonance in the target context.

Given the impact of film titles on audience attraction, understanding societal attitudes, language preferences, and cultural sensitivities is essential for successfully releasing foreign films. Therefore, adaptation to the target country's cultural context is vital, as Vinay and Darbelnet (1995, p.41) emphasized: "If a translator systematically refuses to adapt, it will eventually weaken a target text." This is especially relevant when film titles, which frequently cross linguistic and cultural borders. Film title translation has garnered growing attention from linguists and translation scholars, particularly for its role in bridging cultures. Titles are not just linguistic signs; they are semiotic and cultural markers with the power to attract, persuade, and even evoke emotion. In China, for instance, the translation of English film titles has evolved into a nuanced practice that reflects both linguistic transformation and socio-cultural negotiation.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in audiovisual translation, the translation of film titles remains relatively underexplored. Titles are not merely linguistic units; they are semiotic and cultural signifiers that can evoke emotion, shape viewer expectations, and facilitate

cultural exchange. Šidiškytė and Tamulaitienė (2013) assert that film titles are "the most salient and eye-catching part and would rightly deserve a more extensive and systematic linguistic research" (p.71). Moreover, the importance of film title translation is often underestimated in comparison to other forms of literary translation (Kudirka et al., 2016). Translating a film title involves more than translating words; it involves interpreting and re-presenting meaning for a new audience. As explained by Krasina and Moctar (2020), translating film titles requires balancing the transformation and modulation of meanings while preserving the original information and conveying the intended message. While numerous studies have examined translation strategies through various theoretical lenses, few have approached film title translation using adaptation theory. This study addresses that gap by applying Volkova and Zubenina's (2015) framework of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation—a perspective not yet widely employed in this field.

Drawing on a corpus of English-language texts and their Chinese translations sourced from IMDb and Douban, this study investigates how adaptation strategies are used to accommodate both linguistic and cultural shifts. Specifically, the research seeks to answer two key questions: 1. What are the pragmatic and socio-cultural features of English film titles? and 2. What translation strategies or techniques are employed within the framework of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation? Through this inquiry, the study aims to enrich our understanding of film title translation and offer practical insights for translators navigating the complex dynamics of cross-cultural audiovisual communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies on Film Titles Features

A growing body of research has explored the features of film titles, with much of it focusing on their linguistic properties. Scholars such as Wang and Ji (2021) and Xu (2024) describe English film titles as concise, understandable, and attractive. These titles are frequently brief yet informative, functioning effectively to draw the audience's attention. Bai (2018) mentions the brevity of English film titles and demonstrates cultural, artistic, and commercial dimensions. Some studies have examined film titles through specific theoretical lenses. For example, Zhou (2017) applied Schema theory to explain how audiences interpret film titles based on prior knowledge. Similarly, Gabrić et al. (2017) highlighted the advertising function of film titles, linking their brevity and informativeness to their ability to create intrigue. Xu (2024) similarly underscores the diversity and vividness of English film titles while reaffirming their conciseness, understandability, and attractiveness.

At a more detailed level, Pogodayeva (2020) analyzes the pragmalinguistic features of film titles by analyzing their syntactic, lexical, semantic, and phonetic characteristics. Akbash (2023), on the other hand, focused on the lexical and structural features of movie titles in Chinese, contributing to a comparative understanding of titling across languages.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the linguistic and stylistic qualities of film titles, relatively few have investigated their pragmatic and socio-cultural dimensions. However, film titles operate on more than a linguistic level; they also engage with cultural narratives, social expectations, and genre-specific conventions. Given their central role in cross-cultural film promotion, it is crucial to analyze the pragmatic and socio-cultural features of film titles to understand how translation decisions are shaped by both language and culture.

2.2 Translation Theories on Film Titles

Various theoretical frameworks have been employed to examine the translation of film titles. Many scholars have explored how translation theory influences the strategies used to render titles across linguistic and cultural boundaries. For instance, Díaz-Pérez (2014) uses the Relevance theory (Gutt,1991) to analyze how puns in Spanish film titles are translated into English. Building on this, Gao (2023) applied Relevance theory to examine how English film titles are translated into Chinese, showing how translators adjust titles to align with audience expectations while preserving communicative intent.

Another prominent approach is Eco-translatology, proposed by Hu Gengshen (2011), which views translation as an adaptive process involving multiple dimensions. Studies by Yin and Tian (2016) and Wan and Ji (2021) used this theory to explore strategies and methods of translating English film titles into Chinese. Qi (2016), meanwhile, adopted Verschueren's (1999) Adaptation theory to examine how cultural and linguistic elements are adjusted to fit the target audience's context.

Other scholars have turned to Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1989) to analyse how translation decisions are guided by the function or purpose of the translated text. For instance, Sun (2020) and Kuang (2023) applied the theory to investigate how translators prioritize communicative goals over strict fidelity to the source. Additionally, Tsoi (2022) examines the impact of culture-specific items in the translation of Hollywood film titles across Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, using Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization (1995,1998). Yuan (2022) echoed these findings in the reverse direction, noting that while domestication remains prevalent, a balanced approach is more effective in promoting intercultural understanding.

Despite this growing interest, relatively few studies have examined film title translation through the lens of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation. This gap is significant given that film titles are not only linguistic expressions but also cultural artefacts that mediate between different audience expectations. Exploring them through a socio-pragmatic lens helps uncover how translation choices reflect broader communicative and cultural dynamics.

2.3 Concept of Adaptation

In translation, the term "adaptation" refers to the process of reshaping content to better fit the cultural, communicative, and contextual realities of the target audiences. Unlike adaptation in dramatic works, which involves major transformations, translation adaptation mostly involves selective changes to preserve communicative balance. As Sager (1997) mentioned, "Adaptation is seen as a complex process that may involve translation techniques that could as well lead to the change in the content of the original" (p. 32).

Bastin (1993) describes adaptation as a process of re-establishing communicative equilibrium that might otherwise be lost in a direct translation. Furthermore, adaptation in translation aligns closely with the culture of a society, a concept supported by Abbasi et al. (2012). According to Abbasi et al. (2012), translation is not just a literary recasting of a work from one language to another. Adaptation plays a central role in translation in today's increasingly globalized context, especially when dealing with culturally rich texts such as film titles. Translators are no longer just linguistic intermediaries; they act as cultural mediators who must ensure that meaning is preserved while tailoring the message to the cultural realities of the target audience.

2.4 The Pragmatic and Socio-cultural Adaptation Theory

This paper adopts the Pragmatic and Socio-Cultural Adaptation Theory proposed by Volkova and Zubenina (2015), which offers a nuanced framework for analyzing translations rich with cultural and communicative content. According to their approach, "translation" and "adaptation" are both parts of an interaction between different cultures. Adaptation is essential to the translation process, creating a connection between cultures. On this note, Volkova and Zubenina (2015) identify three factors that necessitate adaptation in translation: cross-code breakdown, situational or cultural inadequacy, and disruption of the communication process. In other words, adaptation becomes essential when direct translation fails to convey the intended message, either due to cultural distance, linguistic limitations, or differences in discourse norms.

The theory distinguishes between two complementary types of adaptation: pragmatic and socio-cultural (as summarized in Appendix A). Drawing from earlier work by Panu (2011), pragmatic adaptation is referred to as "the modification of the source text to produce the text which conforms to the needs of a new language environment". This might include changing tone, emphasis, or stylistic elements to align with the norms of the target readership.

Socio-cultural adaptation, meanwhile, involves adjusting elements of the text that are deeply embedded in the source culture. These may include references to historical events, culturally specific idioms, names, or values that would not resonate—or might even be misunderstood—by the target audience. As Nord (2001) aptly puts it, "translating means comparing cultures," a process that inevitably involves negotiation between different worldviews.

Volkova and Zubenina outline a set of criteria and strategies for identifying and implementing these adaptations across three levels, which are the textual, discursive, and communicative levels. Each level offers insights into different dimensions of the source text that may require transformation. At the textual level, adaptation may involve handling metaphors, stylistic devices, or grammatical structures. The discursive level considers how meaning is shaped through the goals and tone of the text, while the communicative level addresses how the text functions in interaction with its audience, whether to inform, entertain, persuade, or provoke thought. Pragmatic adaptation, for example, includes techniques such as omission, expansion, exoticism, creation, and explicitness change, among others. In contrast, socio-cultural adaptation encompasses strategies such as transcription/transliteration, translation by cultural substitution, loan words, and descriptive translation. Overarching approaches like domestication (adapting content to target culture norms) and foreignization (preserving source culture elements) serve as guiding principles for these choices.

This framework has previously been used to study the translation of political texts and formal speeches—for instance, from Russian into English and English into Chinese—where culturally embedded references are common. Darwish et al. (2022) applied it to analyze Netflix episode titles translated from English to Arabic, showing how socio-cultural and pragmatic shifts are required even in seemingly simple textual units like titles.

Despite its usefulness, this theory has not yet been widely applied to the study of film title translation—an area equally rich in cultural references and communicative intention. Film titles function as branding tools and cultural signifiers; they must resonate with audiences across borders while preserving the core identity of the film. This makes them ideal candidates for analysis through Volkova and Zubenina's lens.

Given the parallels between Netflix titles and film titles—both serving as compact representations of larger audiovisual texts—it is reasonable to extend the theory's application to this area. The Chinese film market, in particular, presents a compelling context due to its cultural complexity, regulatory considerations, and rapidly expanding audience base. English-language film titles often include references to idioms, genres, or cultural archetypes that require sensitive adaptation to be understood and appreciated by Chinese audiences. The combination of linguistic transformation and cultural negotiation makes this an ideal site for testing the depth and applicability of the Pragmatic and Socio-Cultural Adaptation Theory.

Volkova and Zubenina (2015) use this to analyze the translation of political texts from Russian to Western countries and English speech translated from English to Chinese, aiming to explore how to make the speech understandable by Chinese college students. Because the process involves many cultural elements and different socio-cultural information, Darwish et al. (2022) analyze Netflix's e-titles translation by evaluating the translation of Netflix e-titles from English to Arabic. They do this by extracting the pragmatic and

socio-cultural features of the source text and analyzing the strategies used by translators to render the adaptation in the target text according to the Pragmatic and Socio-cultural Adaptation theory (2015). However, this theory has never been used to analyze the translation of English film titles into Chinese. Meanwhile, a film can be regarded as a cultural product, and the film's title serves as an advertisement to promote sales and as a brand name for a cultural product. Analyzing the film titles this way is necessary because promotion is even more critical when a cultural product enters foreign countries, such as China. The Chinese market has enormous potential and many potential audiences. They also contain much sociocultural information. English film titles have many similarities with Netflix e-titles. They are audiovisual product titles, and the source languages are the same. Consequently, it is suitable to analyze English film titles' translations using this theory.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how English film titles are translated into Chinese within the framework of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation. The analysis is based on data collected from two widely recognized platforms: IMDb.com, a leading source for English-language film listings; and Douban.com, one of China's most influential platforms for film reviews, ratings, and discussions. The choice of these platforms ensures the relevance and cultural representativeness of the film titles selected.

From IMDb, a preliminary list of 100 English-language film titles was compiled based on popularity rankings. These titles spanned a variety of genres—including romance, drama, action, and tragedy—to ensure diversity in linguistic style and thematic content. Their corresponding Chinese translations were then identified through Douban, which serves as a reliable and community-driven reference for how international films are received and titled in the Chinese market. After initial screening, a total of 44 film titles with clearly available and widely accepted Chinese translations were selected for detailed analysis. The selection was based on the completeness of title correspondence and the availability of consistent translations across platforms.

For the data analysis, the 44 titles were examined using the adaptation criteria (see Appendix A) developed by Volkova and Zubenina (2015). These criteria focus on three levels—textual, discursive, and communicative—to uncover how pragmatic and socio-cultural elements shape translation choices. The study identified key linguistic and cultural features in the source titles that might necessitate adaptation and then evaluated the specific translation strategies used to address them in the target language.

The process involved identifying whether each adaptation was motivated by pragmatic needs (e.g., clarity, tone, or communicative function) or socio-cultural concerns (e.g., historical references, idioms, or culturally bound terms). Translation strategies were classified according to the taxonomy proposed by Volkova and Zubenina (2015), which includes techniques such as creation, omission, explicitness change, domestication, foreignization, and paraphrasing, among others. To support this comparative analysis, the researchers also used back translation and literal translation techniques. These methods were applied to highlight the differences between the original English titles and their Chinese renderings, helping to clarify the types of adaptations that had taken place and the rationale behind them. For each title, pragmatic and socio-cultural features were documented and cross-referenced with the strategies applied by the translators. The full list of titles and their corresponding translation strategies is included in Appendix B, which serves as the primary data source for the study's results and discussion.

4. Results

This section presents the findings related to the pragmatic and socio-cultural features identified in the selected English film titles, as well as the translation strategies applied in their Chinese versions. The analysis follows the framework proposed by Volkova and Zubenina (2015), examining adaptations across textual, discursive, and communicative levels.

4.1 The Pragmatic and Socio-Cultural Features of Film Titles

The analysis of the 44 English film titles reveals a rich interplay of linguistic and cultural elements that often require adaptation during translation. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the distribution of features based on the pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation criteria. Table 1 presents film titles that reflect pragmatic adaptation triggers, while Table 2 focuses on socio-cultural features. The results show that the titles are almost evenly distributed across pragmatic and socio-cultural categories, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of title translation. Notably, 14 titles were found to engage both types of adaptation, illustrating how film titles often function simultaneously as linguistic, cultural, and communicative tools.

Table 1. Pragmatic Adaptation Criteria

Adaptation Levels	Descriptions of Adaptation	Number of Film Titles	Examples
Textual Level	colloquial term; lexical parameter, stylistic, metaphorical, plural nouns	11	Hit Man, Mad Max: Fury Road, Pearl
Discursive Level	emotional/abstract discourse, suspense narrative, affective discourse cue, religious and emotional discourse	9	The Idea of You, A Quiet Place: Day One, The Shawshank Redemption
Communicative Level	mysterious abbreviation, inferential, entertainment genre-marked title, motivational tone, directive, suspense-building communication	10	Inside Out 2, IF, Dune: Part Two

Table 2. Socio-cultural Adaptation Criteria

Adaptation Levels	Descriptions of Adaptation	Number of Film Titles	Examples
Textual Level	culture-bound name, post-apocalyptic motif, cultural stereotype, or myth reference	10	Mad Max: Fury Road; Kung Fu Panda 4
Discursive Level	historical/political interdiscursive reference, franchise discourse, parody culture	9	The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare, Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire
Communicative Level	cultural icons, intertextuality, pop culture icon	11	Wonder. The Hunger Games

The analysis of the 44 selected English film titles, based on the adaptation framework by Volkova and Zubenina (2015), reveals a balanced distribution of features that triggered both pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation across the textual, discursive, and communicative levels. These findings highlight the complex nature of film titles as not only linguistic constructs but also cultural and communicative artifacts.

At the pragmatic level, most of the titles required modification due to their use of colloquial terms, idiomatic expressions, or emotional and metaphorical language. For instance, titles such as *Hit Man, Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *Pearl* illustrate stylistic or lexical markers that are culturally coded and not easily transferable without adaptation. The discursive level of pragmatic adaptation involved emotionally charged, abstract, or suspenseful content. Titles like *The Idea of You*, *A Quiet Place: Day One*, and *The Shawshank Redemption* rely on affective cues that need careful handling to maintain emotional impact in translation. At the communicative level, features such as abbreviations, genre signals, and motivational tones appeared in titles like *Inside Out 2*, *IF, and Dune: Part Two*. These titles serve as engagement tools, often using elliptical or referential language that requires cultural unpacking for the target audience.

Regarding socio-cultural adaptation, film titles often drew on references that were culturally specific or tied to well-known icons, narratives, or motifs. At the textual level, examples such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Kung Fu Panda 4* featured cultural stereotypes or post-apocalyptic motifs that needed local cultural alignment. At the discursive level, titles such as *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare* and *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* invoked intertextuality and genre conventions that reflect Western historical or parody cultures. These titles had to be reshaped or reframed to be meaningful within the Chinese socio-cultural context. The communicative level featured titles like *Wonder and The Hunger Games*, which drew upon familiar pop culture and intertextual associations—elements that do not always translate directly and often require adaptation strategies such as domestication or cultural substitution.

Interestingly, 14 out of 44 titles contained features that activated both pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation. These include *Anyone But You*, *Bad Boys: Ride or Die*, *Get Out*, *Inside Out*, *Interstellar*, *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*, *Titanic*, *Madame Web*, *Dune*, *The Fall Guy*, *Wonder*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Civil War*, and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*. For example, *Anyone But You* is a colloquial emotional expression that also conveys romantic conflict, combining pragmatic challenges with culturally nuanced interpersonal discourse. *Bad Boys: Ride or Die* uses idiomatic, motivational language that must be culturally and stylistically reinterpreted in the target language. *Interstellar* and *Titanic*, on the other hand, reflect deeply embedded socio-cultural knowledge—scientific imagination and historical memory, respectively—requiring adaptations that preserve both meaning and cultural resonance. *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* integrates stylistic and genre-specific language ("saga") with cultural references, demonstrating the need for both types of adaptation within a single title.

These findings affirm that film titles frequently operate on multiple levels at once, intertwining language, culture, and communication in ways that demand strategic and context-sensitive translation. The need to adapt across different levels illustrates why film title translation is not merely a matter of linguistic substitution but a task that requires deep cultural awareness and pragmatic sensitivity.

4.2 Translation Strategies/Techniques of Film Titles

The analysis of the 44 film titles also identified the specific translation strategies and techniques employed to adapt the source texts for the Chinese market, categorized according to the pragmatic and socio-cultural dimensions outlined by Volkova and Zubenina (2015). The frequency and application of these techniques offer valuable insights into how translators navigate linguistic and cultural complexities in audiovisual translation, particularly when it comes to titles, which must be both concise and impactful.

It was found that the pragmatic adaptation strategies/techniques used are explicitness change, creation, coherence change, expansion, illocutionary change, interpersonal change, visibility change, partial translation, and transediting. The sociocultural adaptation strategies/techniques are domestication, translation by paraphrasing, addition, foreignization, translation by cultural substitution, formal equivalence, transcription/transliteration, translation by loan word, descriptive translation, and generalization. The raw frequency and percentage frequency of translation strategies/techniques from pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation perspectives used in film title translation are illustrated below in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The analysis revealed that a diverse range of strategies and techniques were employed to achieve pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation in the translation of film titles. On the pragmatic side, the most used strategies included explicitness change and creation, alongside others such as coherence change, expansion, illocutionary change, interpersonal change, visibility change, partial translation, and transediting. These techniques were applied to clarify meaning, reconstruct communicative intent, or enhance the emotional and stylistic resonance of the titles for the target audience.

A similar wide array of strategies was observed for socio-cultural adaptation. This included domestication, translation by paraphrasing, addition, foreignization, translation by cultural substitution, formal equivalence, transcription/transliteration, translation by loan word, descriptive translation, and generalization. Each strategy served to bridge cultural gaps and ensure that the titles aligned with the expectations, values, and interpretive frameworks of Chinese audiences.

The raw frequency and percentage distribution of these strategies are illustrated in Figure 1 (pragmatic adaptation) and Figure 2 (socio-cultural adaptation), offering a visual overview of how often each technique was applied across the dataset.
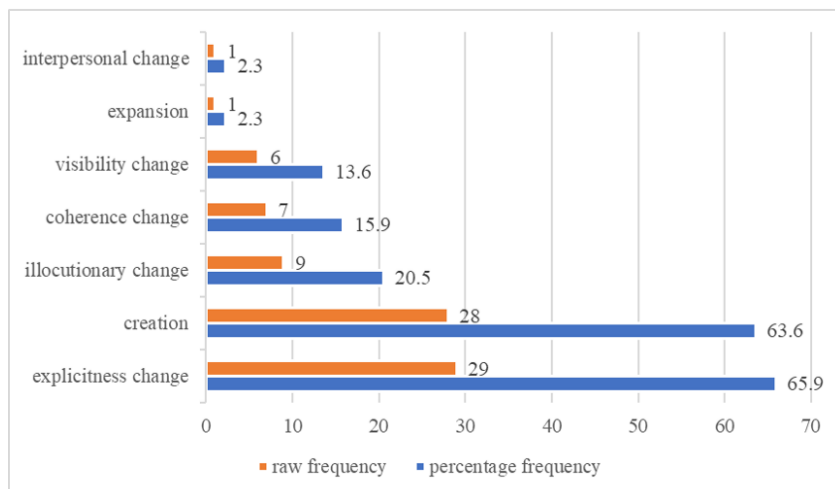

Figure 1. Percentage of Pragmatic Adaptation Strategies/Techniques

From the pragmatic adaptation perspective, the most frequently applied technique was explicitness change, used in 65.9% of the titles (29 out of 44). This strategy involves making the implicit content of the original title more explicit in the translation, or vice versa, to align with the communicative conventions of the target language. The high frequency of this strategy reflects a tendency among translators to clarify or restructure meaning to ensure that it is immediately understandable and engaging for Chinese audiences. The second most common strategy was creation, used in 63.5% of the titles (28 instances), which involves constructing a new title in the target language that preserves the core idea or emotional tone of the original but may significantly diverge in form. This is useful when the source title contains abstract concepts that cannot be directly translated.

Other pragmatic strategies—such as coherence change, illocutionary change, interpersonal change, and expansion—were used less frequently, appearing only once or twice across the dataset. These techniques tend to involve more subtle shifts in the structure or communicative intent of the title and are often reserved for specific cases where a direct translation would result in confusion or misinterpretation. The relatively lower frequency of these strategies suggests that, in most cases, translators prioritized more visible interventions like creation and explicitness change to enhance audience comprehension and engagement.
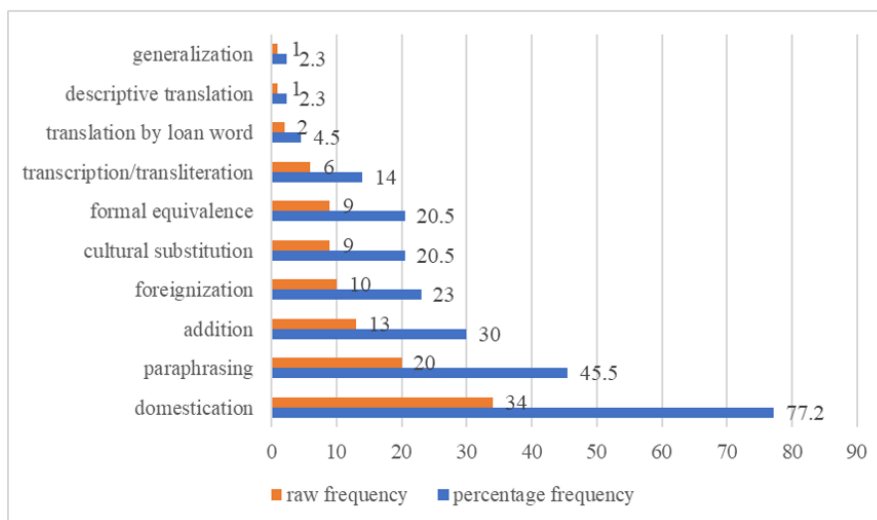

Figure 2. Percentage of Socio-cultural Adaptation Strategies/Techniques

In terms of socio-cultural adaptation, Figure 2 shows that the dominant strategy was domestication, applied in 77.2% of the cases (34 out of 44 titles). Domestication involves tailoring the translated title to fit the cultural norms, expectations, and background knowledge of the target audience. This approach reflects an effort to ensure that culturally unfamiliar references, such as Western idioms, are rendered in ways that are familiar and relatable to Chinese viewers. As Chesterman and Wagner (2002) explained, domestication functions as a form of cultural filtering, helping to make the translation more accessible and acceptable. The second most frequently used socio-cultural technique was translation by paraphrasing, found in 45.5% of the titles (20 instances). This strategy involves rephrasing the original content using culturally and linguistically appropriate expressions to preserve meaning while enhancing fluency and relevance in the target language.

Other techniques, including addition, translation by cultural substitution, loan words, transcription/transliteration, and descriptive translation, were used selectively depending on the demands of the individual title. For instance, foreignization and transliteration were employed in cases where preserving the original name or term was seen as important for brand recognition or authenticity (e.g., *Titanic, Oppenheimer, Dune*). In contrast, strategies like generalization and descriptive translation were rarely used, appearing only once each, suggesting that such techniques are less effective or less appropriate in the highly condensed format of film titles.

Overall, the findings indicate translators prefer audience-centered strategies, particularly those that aim to clarify, reframe, or culturally realign the original title in a way that resonates with Chinese viewers. The dominance of explicitness change, creation, and domestication supports the conclusion that translators prioritize accessibility, marketability, and emotional appeal, even if it means departing from the source text's literal form. These strategies underscore the essential role of the translator not only as a linguistic intermediary but also as a cultural negotiator who must balance fidelity with functionality in an increasingly globalized media environment.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how English film titles are translated into Chinese using the lens of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation. The findings indicate that English film titles often carry complex layers of meaning, unlimited to literal interpretation. Many titles include colloquial language, emotional undertones, metaphorical expressions, and genre-specific cues, all of which require careful adjustment to align with the target audience's expectations. This supports the argument made by Zeng (2019), who observed that film titles are rich in metaphor and metonymy—two powerful rhetorical devices used to build brand identity and audience intrigue. These devices are not easily transferred between languages and cultures, which is why adaptation becomes a necessary step in translation rather than a mere option.

From a pragmatic perspective, the study found that the most frequently used techniques were explicitness change and creation. These strategies allow translators to reconstruct or reinterpret the meaning of the original title in a way that enhances clarity and emotional resonance for the target audience. Rather than maintaining strict literal fidelity, translators often reframe the title to suit local communicative norms and viewer expectations. This aligns with the understanding that film titles function primarily as marketing tools—designed to inform, attract, and persuade. Therefore, strategies that prioritize communicative effectiveness over linguistic equivalence are not only justified but necessary.

On the socio-cultural front, domestication emerged as the most dominant strategy. This confirms earlier findings by Yuan (2022) and Gu and Yang (2024), who noted the widespread use of domestication in the translation of film and animation titles from English to Chinese. The preference for domestication reflects the practical need to make foreign content more relatable and appealing to local audiences, especially in a market as culturally and linguistically distinct as China's. The results suggest that cultural familiarity is often prioritized over preserving the source culture's specificity, particularly when that specificity could hinder understanding or emotional connection.

The strong presence of paraphrasing among socio-cultural techniques further highlights the translator's role in reshaping content to match cultural expectations. This strategy was often employed when the original title contained references, humor, or idiomatic expressions that were unlikely to be understood or appreciated by Chinese viewers. In such cases, paraphrasing provided a culturally and linguistically appropriate alternative while preserving the intended impact of the original.

Overall, the findings reinforce the idea that film title translation is a highly adaptive and audience-driven practice. Translators are not merely linguistic intermediaries but also cultural mediators who must balance fidelity, function, and marketability. By applying Volkova and Zubenina's (2015) model, this study illustrates how both pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation are essential to ensuring that film titles are not only understood but also culturally and emotionally effective in the target context.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the translation of English film titles into Chinese from the perspective of pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation, drawing on the framework proposed by Volkova and Zubenina (2015). While previous applications of this theory mostly focused on political discourses or streaming content such as Netflix e-titles, this research expands its application to the film industry, specifically, to film titles, which function as compact, high-impact textual elements at the intersection of language, culture, and marketing. While previous applications of this theory have focused largely on political discourse, this research expands its application to the film industry—specifically, to film titles, which function as compact, high-impact textual elements at the intersection of language, culture, and marketing.

The findings highlight the importance of adaptation at three key levels—textual, discursive, and communicative—revealing that film titles

frequently contain linguistic and cultural cues that require nuanced handling. Common features such as colloquial phrases, metaphors, emotional tone, and cultural references trigger a variety of adaptation strategies aimed at preserving meaning and appeal in the target language. Titles are not merely translated; they are reimagined to fit new cultural and communicative environments.

The analysis demonstrated that explicitness change and creation were the most frequently used strategies from a pragmatic perspective, while domestication dominated among socio-cultural techniques. These choices reflect a broader trend in translation practice, which prioritizes the reception and comprehension of the target audience over equivalence with the source text. This reinforces the translator's role as an active participant in shaping cross-cultural communication, especially in contexts where the title serves both an artistic and commercial function.

By applying a pragmatic and socio-cultural adaptation model to film title translation, this study contributes to the growing body of work in audiovisual translation and titleology. It offers a structured approach to analyzing how cultural and communicative factors shape translation choices, and it provides practical insights for translators who work with highly compressed, culturally loaded texts.

Nevertheless, the study also has limitations. The dataset was restricted to 100 popular English-language film titles, with 44 titles selected for detailed analysis based on the availability of Chinese translations. The study did not account for genre-specific patterns or diachronic shifts in translation strategies, both of which could offer valuable insights. Future research could address these gaps by adopting a corpus-based approach, exploring changes in translation strategies over time, or investigating how genre conventions influence adaptation choices.

In sum, this study underscores the importance of viewing film title translation as a multidimensional process that involves more than just linguistic transfer. It is an act of cultural concession and communicative molding, shaped by audience expectations, media trends, and the evolving role of the translator in the global cultural industry.

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Appendix A

Source Text Pragmatic and Sociocultural Criteria

Pragmatic Criteria	Socio-cultural Criteria
Textual Level	
Lexical and semantic parameters of a source text, like colloquial or evaluative expressions (pp. 98-99).	Lexical and semantic parameters of a source text, like colloquial or evaluative expressions (pp. 98-99).
Syntactic peculiarities of a source text which are related to the structure of the sentence, word order, compound, etc. (pp. 98-99).	The specific use of pronouns in the ST (pp. 98-99).
The grammar of a source text (grammatical parameters), like modal verbs (p. 98-99).	The use of cultural lacunas and realia which may not exist in the TL (p. 98-99).
The stylistic aspect of a source text (stylistic parameters), such as metaphors and similes, proverbs, sayings, etc. (pp. 98-99).	Lexical elements reflecting social and cultural peculiarities of the ST or the source culture (SC) and its reality, like words describing gestures, etc. (p. 98-99).
Discursive Level	
Goals of discourse, discourse key concepts, field of discourse, and tenor of discourse (pp. 98-99).	Implicit or explicit culture-specific values of a source discourse and interdiscursive elements of a source text (pp. 98-99).
Communicative Level	
Functions of communication: cognitive, communicative, motivational, etc., and Typical features of communication that may appear unusual to the target readers like informativity, institutionality, accessibility, etc. (p. 98-99).	Intertextual elements of an ST, such as allusions, quotations, statistics, etc. (pp. 98-99).

Appendix B

Selected Film Titles and Their Pragmatic and Socio-cultural Adaptation Strategies

	English Film Titles	Literal Translation	Chinese Translation	Back Translation	Pragmatic Adaptation Strategies	Sociocultural Adaptation Strategies/Techniques
1	Inside Out 2	内在外部 2 (Nèizài wàibù 2)	头脑特工队 2	Special Forces of Mind 2	Creation, Explicitness Change	Addition, Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
2	Hit Man	击中人 (Jīzhòng rén)	职业杀手	Professional Killer	Explicitness Change	Domestication, Generalization
3	Bad Boys: Ride or Die	坏男孩：骑或死 (Huài nánhái: Qí huò sǐ)	绝地战警：生死与共	Warriors in desperate: live and die together	Expansion, Explicitness Change, Coherence Change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
4	Inside Out	内在外部 (Nèizài wàibù)	头脑特工队	Special Forces of Brain	Creation, Explicitness Change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
5	IF	如果 (Rúguǒ)	神秘友友	Mysterious Friend	Creation, Illocutionary change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
6	Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga	愤怒者：疯狂的麦克斯传奇 (Fènnù zhě: Fēngkuáng de Màikèsī chuánqí)	疯狂的麦克斯：狂暴女神	Mad Max: Furious Goddess	Creation, Explicitness Change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
7	The Fall Guy	倒霉的人 (Dǎoméi de rén)	特技狂人	Stunt Maniac	Creation, Interpersonal Change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
8	Civil War	内战 (Nèizhàn)	美国内战	American Civil War	Explicitness Change	Domestication, Formal Equivalence
9	Dune: Part Two	沙丘：第二部分 (Shāqiū: Dì èr bùfèn)	沙丘：ii	Dune: Part Two	Explicitness change	Addition, Foreignization, Translation by Loan Word
10	Oppenheimer	奥本海默 (Àoběnhǎimò)	奥本海默	Oppenheimer	Visibility change	Foreignization, Transcription/Transliteration
11	Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes	猿猴星球的王国 (Yuánhóu xīngqiú de wángguó)	星球崛起新世界	Rise of the Planet: New World	Creation, Coherence change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
12	Deadpool & Wolverine	死侍与金刚狼 (Sǐshì yǔ Jīngāngláng)	死侍与金刚狼	Deadpool & Wolverine	Visibility change	Foreignization, Transcription/Transliteration
13	The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare	不绅士战争部 (Bù shēnshì zhànzhēng bù)	盟军敢死队	Allied Commandos	Explicitness change, Creation	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
14	Anyone But You	除了你 (Chúle nǐ)	只想爱你	Only Want to Love You	Creation, Illocutionary change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
15	Monkey Man	猴子人 (Hóuzi rén)	怒火战猴	Angry War Monkey	Creation, Explicitness change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
16	A Quiet Place: Day One	一个安静的地方：第一天 (Yī gè ānjìng de dìfāng: Dì yī tiān)	寂静之地	A Quiet Place	Explicitness change	Domestication, Formal Equivalence
17	Smile	微笑 (Wéixiào)	危笑	Dangerous Smile	Creation, Illocutionary change,	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
18	Mad Max: Fury Road	疯狂的麦克斯：狂暴之路 (Fēngkuáng de Màikèsī: Kuángbào zhī lù)	疯狂的麦克斯：狂暴之路	Mad Max: Fury Road	Creation, Explicitness change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
19	Despicable Me 4	卑鄙的我 4 (Bēibǐ de wǒ 4)	神偷奶爸 4	A master thief daddy 4	Creation, Explicitness change	Addition, Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
20	Godzilla x	哥斯拉大战金	哥斯拉大	Godzilla vs.	Creation,	Addition

	Kong: The New Empire	刚：新帝国 (Gēsīlā dàzhàn Jīngāng: Xīn dìguó)	战金刚 2：帝国崛起	Kong 2: Rise of the Empire	Explicitness change, Coherence change	Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
21	Madame Web	网夫人 (Wǎng fūrén)	蜘蛛夫人	Madame Web	Visibility change	Foreignization，Transcription/Transliteration
22	MaXXXine	麦克西因 (Màikèxīyīn)	玛克辛	MaXXXine	Visibility change	Foreignization，Transcription/Transliteration
23	Twisters	龙卷风 (Lóngjuǎnfēng)	龙卷风	Tornado	Explicitness change	Domestication, Formal Equivalence
24	The Idea of You	你的想法 (Nǐ de xiǎngfǎ)	对你的想象	The Imagination of You	Creation, Illocutionary change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
25	Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire	捉鬼敢死队：冰冻帝国 (Zhuōguǐ gǎnsǐduì: Bīngdòng dìguó)	超能敢死队：冰封之城	Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire	Creation, Explicitness change	Addition Creation, Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
26	The Garfield Movie	The Garfield Movie - 加菲猫电影 (Jiāfēimāo diànyǐng)	加菲猫家族	The Garfield Family	Creation, Illocutionary change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
27	Dune	沙丘 (Shāqiū)	沙丘	Dune	Explicitness change	Foreignization, Translation by Loan Word
28	Abigail	阿比盖尔 (Ābǐgàiěr)	噬血芭蕾	Bloodthirsty Ballet	Creation Illocutionary change,	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
29	Bad Boys	坏男孩 (Huài nánhái)	绝地战警：生死与共	Bad Boys: Ride or Die	Creation, Explicitness change	Addition Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
30	Alien: Romulus	异形：罗穆卢斯 (Yìxíng: Luómùlúsī)	异形：夺命舰	Alien: Deadly Ship	Creation, Explicitness change, Coherence change	Addition, Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing, Translation by Cultural Substitution
31	The Shawshank Redemption	肖申克的救赎 (Xiāoshēnkè de jiùshú)	肖申克的救赎	The Shawshank Redemption	Creation Explicitness Change, Visibility Change	Domestication, Descriptive Translation Transcription/Transliteration,
32	Bad Boys for Life	坏男孩终身 (Huài nánhái zhōngshēn)	绝地战警：疾速追击	Bad Boys for Life (not released in Mainland China)	Creation, Explicitness Change	Addition Domestication, Translation by Cultural Substitution
33	Top Gun: Maverick	壮志凌云：独行侠 (Zhuàngzhì língyún: Dúxíngxiá)	壮志凌云：独行侠	Top Gun: Maverick	Creation, Explicitness change, Coherence change	Addition Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
34	The Hunger Games	饥饿游戏 (Jī'è yóuxì)	饥饿游戏	The Hunger Games	Explicitness Change	Foreignization, Formal Equivalence
35	The Beekeeper	养蜂人 (Yǎngfēngrén)	养蜂人	The Beekeeper	Explicitness Change	Domestication, Formal Equivalence
36	The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes	饥饿游戏：鸣鸟与蛇之歌 (Jī'è yóuxì: Míng niǎo yǔ shé zhī gē)	饥饿游戏：鸣鸟与蛇之歌	The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes	Explicitness Change, Coherence Change	Addition Foreignization, Formal Equivalence
37	Get Out	逃出 (Táo chū)	逃出绝命镇	Get Out of the Killing Town	Creation, Illocutionary Change, Explicitness Change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
38	Interstellar	星际穿越 (Xīngjì chuānyuè)	星际穿越	Through the Interstellar	Creation, Explicitness Change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
39	The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	指环王：护戒同盟 (Zhǐhuán wáng: Hùjiè tóngméng)	指环王：护戒使者	The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	Creation, Explicitness Change, Coherence Change	Addition Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing

40	Wonder	奇迹 (Qíjī)	奇迹男孩	Wonder Boy	Creation, Illocutionary Change	Addition Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
41	Once Upon a Time in... Hollywood	从前在好莱坞 (Cóngqián zài Hǎoláiwū)	好莱坞往事	Once Upon a Time in Hollywood	Creation, Explicitness Change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
42	Kung Fu Panda 4	功夫熊猫 4 (Gōngfū xióngmāo 4)	功夫熊猫 4	Kung Fu Panda 4	Explicitness Change	Addition Foreignization, Formal Equivalence
43	Pearl	珍珠 (Zhēnzhū)	台湾：血色珍珠	Bloody Pearl (Taiwan: Blood Pearl)	Creation, Illocutionary Change	Domestication, Translation by Paraphrasing
44	Titanic	泰坦尼克号 (Tàitǎnníkè hào)	泰坦尼克号	Titanic	Visibility change	Foreignization，Transcription/Transliteration