

## Multiphase and Multistakeholder English Translation Processes Behind Subtitling Chinese Auteur Films: An Actor-Network Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

The professional translation processes involved in subtitling Chinese auteur films are under-reported in audiovisual translation literature. The present study investigates the translation processes employed for Chinese films destined for an international audience with a focus on fifth- and sixth-generation directors' films. These film auteurs depict China's diverse cultural elements and contemporary social reality, for which English subtitles provide an essential bridge to connect to an international audience. Interview data collected from 10 established Chinese-to-English translators/subtitlers, whose names are credited in the selected films, identify two remarkable features of subtitling these contemporary Chinese auteur films: Multiple phases of the translation processes employed across the filmmaking lifespan and multiple stakeholders involved in the wider translation processes beyond translators/subtitlers. Actor-Network Theory is used to elicit interwoven relationships among the various human and non-human actors connected to translating/subtitling activities across different stages of filmmaking. These findings confirm that translating/subtitling is not an isolated post-production task but rather permeates all filmmaking phases. This can be a key factor in contributing to overall quality, which is critical in disseminating subtitled films by some of China's most celebrated auteurs.

**Key words:** film subtitling, Chinese films, translation process, subtitling quality, Actor-Network Theory.

## 1. Introduction

Does subtitling merely happen after filming and before the distribution of a film? How do the individuals credited jointly for the English subtitles, English dialogues, or English translation collaborate to produce the final subtitles displayed in the Chinese film? Little is known about English subtitling processes for certain high-profile films made by fifth- and sixth-generation Chinese directors. Fifth-generation directors refer to the directors whose films represent a particularly creative period in Chinese films, approximately from the 1980s through to the early 1990s. Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are two leading figures of fifth-generation directors who endeavour to trace the historical roots of China in their films. Similarly, sixth-generation directors like Jia Zhangke and Feng Xiaogang worked from the late 1990s, focusing on city cultures and social reality in China. These fifth- and sixth-generation directors are known as directors-as-authors, i.e., auteurs. This does not mean that they merely control the performance of a pre-existing text. Instead, they react to or interact with the pre-existing text, which can be a novel or a true story (see 4.1 Translation in Film Development Phase). More often than not, film auteurs in China write screenplays for their works or collaborate with others to produce scripts (see 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase). Since the 1980s, Chinese films have opened for the Western audience to experience China and its diverse local culture, unique long history, and contemporary social reality (Lin, 2002; Marchetti, 2003). Notably, Zhang Yimou's, Chen Kaige's, Jia Zhangke's, and Feng Xiaogang's films have won prestigious international awards. With their rising popularity internationally, subtitling has become the most popular mode of translation used to distribute Chinese films in global markets (Jin, 2018). English subtitles for their films can be expected to demonstrate the best practice in subtitling Chinese films. Yet, this question has not been fully explored, especially with the evidence of empirical data, as the translation of Chinese cinema remains an emerging area of research in audiovisual translation (hereafter AVT). However, the increasing international exposure and the relative success of some of these films call into question the behind-the-screen process of subtitling these films: Who is involved in translation/subtitling<sup>1</sup> processes? When does translation/subtitling take place in filmmaking projects? And how are translation/subtitling processes related to the overall quality of these subtitled films?

Amidst the collaborative translation popularised in fansubbing (Li, 2015; O'Hagan, 2009; Wang & Zhang, 2017; Wongseeree, 2020) and the ubiquity of technological applications in subtitling films (Bywood, 2020; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021), subtitling Chinese auteur films depicting Chinese cultural heritage and social reality seems to hold its own and is akin to translating literary works, comprising a series of phases and involving a variety of stakeholders. By interviewing 10 contributing

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the interviewees only translated the novel based on which the screenplay was written and the film was made, or the screenplay, while some might only participate in subtitling films. Meanwhile, others could be involved from novel translation through to script translation and to film subtitling. In this paper, the expression, "translators/subtitlers" refers to these 10 interviewees. Similarly, "translation/subtitling" or "translating/subtitling" is employed to describe the prolonged translation process in subtitling a high-profile Chinese film, and "translation(s)/subtitle(s)" indicates the relevant semi-finished or finished product(s).

English translators/subtitlers for the four directors' films, this paper investigates how translation/subtitling activities relate to different filmmaking stages and who is involved in these activities. Various stakeholders may collectively contribute to such translation/subtitling processes to achieve a better quality of AVT (Fan, 2020). Therefore, I argue that the multiphase and multistakeholder translation processes likely facilitate the successful dissemination of high-profile Chinese films, such as those made by fifth- and sixth-generation directors, by ensuring the overall quality of their final English subtitles.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The development of Actor-Network Theory (hereafter ANT) in the 1980s and 1990s is attributed to French researchers Michel Callon, Michel Serres, and Bruno Latour. The framework continues to be refined by researchers such as Bruno Latour and John Law. Its trajectory indicates that ANT is “a collective achievement” (Fariás et al., 2019, p. 2). An actor-network approach is not an exercise in creating or constructing networks. Instead, it is primarily a “network-tracing activity” that seeks to understand the models in the real world in the form of actual connections among many actors. When explaining the nature of actions, Latour (2005) observed: “In each course of action a great variety of actors seem to barge in and displace the original goals” (p. 22). That explanation clarifies the influences on actions exerted by various actors. In terms of the nature of groups, “there exist many contradictory ways for actors to be given an identity” (Latour, 2005, p. 22). Starting with the controversies about actors and agencies, Latour (2005) claimed: “Any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant” (p. 71). An actor can be either human or non-human. When humans become mediators, they are hard to be stopped. However, “objects, no matter how important, efficient, central, or necessary they may be, tend to recede into the background very fast”, but “it does not mean they stop acting” (Latour, 2005, p. 80). Meanwhile, Latour (2005) explained that “a good ANT account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and do not just sit there” (p. 128), as all of the participants in a string of actions should be regarded as full-blown mediators.

Following the actors is the method through which ANT builds actor networks. According to Latour (2005), ANT is to “follow the actors in their weaving through things they have added to social skills so as to render more durable the constantly shifting interactions” (p. 68). When trying to unfold an actor network based on an empirical study, researchers need to answer who the actors are, what the associations between them are, and how the associations are established. This research attempts to identify who the stakeholders (i.e., human actors) are, what materials (i.e., non-human actors) they are provided with or are producing, what relationships exist between them (either human or non-human actors), and how the relationships are built. Research in an ANT framework can proceed by analysing the plane of pure action where researchers try to find any hidden connections between otherwise unconnected elements, expanding the network as necessary to include new actors. In the context of translation studies, we would thus start from the individual actors surrounding a translation text, proceeding to find their connections with other human or non-human actors. This

research casts translators/subtitlers on the central stage and treats them as the starting point for investigating the stakeholders involved in the translation process of Chinese films across different phases of filmmaking. To this end, an interview survey was conducted for translators/subtitlers to elicit data related to these behind-the-screen translation processes.

### 3. Methodology

This research draws on interview data collected from the translators/subtitlers contributing to auteur films directed by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Jia Zhangke, and Feng Xiaogang. They are well-known auteurs in the contemporary Chinese film industry and the representatives of fifth- and sixth-generation directors in China. By searching the titles related to translation or subtitling tasks in the end credits for 48 Chinese films made by these four auteurs, 33 translators/subtitlers were identified. The translators/subtitlers were located through online research where their contact details were obtained from sources such as Goodreads,<sup>2</sup> Paper Republic,<sup>3</sup> IMDb (Internet Movie Database),<sup>4</sup> LinkedIn, Academia.edu, and the universities where they work(ed). Additionally, a personal contact of my co-supervisor, Professor Paul Clark, a pioneer in the academic study of Chinese films, also assisted in locating the eligible interviewee. Finally, the contact details of 16 subtitlers/translators were obtained through these sources for this study.

Following the ethical approval issued by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (hereafter UAHPEC) on June 21, 2019 (protocol number 023311), the interview survey started in late June 2019 and concluded in May 2022. In total, 10 translators/subtitlers eventually accepted the interview requests, and all the interviews were conducted online via Zoom, emails, or other online channels. These participants are anonymised and randomly coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10 in the following discussion for ethical consideration. As specified in the interview consent form, the collected interview data used in this paper follow the UAHPEC's confidentiality and anonymity rules. Given the relatively small talent pool of established English translators/subtitlers contributing to Chinese auteur films, the revelation of their native languages, years of experience, and gender may make their identities traceable. Therefore, the relevant data will be presented in a general sense. Among these 10 interviewees (five female, five male), two are native Chinese speakers, while eight are native English speakers. Nine had translated/subtitled part-time or freelance, and only one identified her/himself as a full-time translator. Calculating their exact years of experience in translation/subtitling is almost impossible. However, most have translated/subtitled contemporary Chinese films for over a decade, including some time lapses during which time they did not focus on translation/subtitling activities.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://paper-republic.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/>

Among these 10 participants, four completed both 25 initial questions and several follow-up email questions, one finished the initial questions and did not respond to the follow-up email questions, two agreed to a few quick questions via email or LinkedIn message, and three were interviewed via Zoom. Except for one Zoom interview conducted in Chinese, all other nine interviews were in English in either written or oral form. Since the data will be described in English, the researcher prepared the questions in English, even though all the interviewees speak Chinese with varying degrees of proficiency. As a native speaker of Chinese, one of the participants preferred to be interviewed in Chinese in the interest of time. The researcher translated this interview transcript. Since this is a semi-structured interview survey, the data provided by the interviewees are not limited to the selected directors' works but may come from their other previous translation/subtitling experiences. The latter includes films made by other established Chinese film auteurs, such as Diao Yinan, Gu Changwei, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Li Shaohong, Li Yang, Peng Xiaolian, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Wong Kar Wai. Given their international contributions to promoting Chinese films, these data are also integrated into this research.

ANT (Callon, 1999, 2007; Law, 1999; Latour, 1987, 1999, 2005; Michael, 2016) is a potent tool for integrating human and non-human actors into an interwoven network and has been adopted to describe the interrelationships among and across the human and non-human actors (e.g., stakeholders, accompanying materials, translation products) involved in translating/subtitling the studied films. In this research, such a network serves to guarantee translation quality (Moorkens et al., 2018) in Chinese films. Human actors can be script translators, subtitle translators, subtitle adapters, subtitle editors, and also directors, producers, screenwriters, and distributors, who become involved in film translation/subtitling activities at different filmmaking stages. Non-human actors may include a selected novel, novel story translation, Chinese screenplay, screenplay translation, Chinese dialogue list, previous subtitle translation, etc. Some become source (start) texts (Pym, 2013) for translation/subtitling activities, whereas others are semi-finished translation/subtitling products in contrast to the final English subtitles screened before the English-speaking audience. All these actors will be traced in the interview responses provided by the 10 translators/subtitlers as they emerge from a prolonged translation/subtitling process embedded in various filmmaking stages. The interview data analysis will also explore how these actors and stages are related to the international popularity of these high-profile Chinese films disseminated with the aid of English subtitles. In reference to these stages, a network of actors playing a role in the quality control (Abdallah, 2011; Alfaro de Carvalho, 2012; Nikolic, 2021; Robert & Remael, 2016) of these AVT products will be mapped and illustrated in the following sections.

#### **4. Multiphase Translation Process**

The filmmaking process is complex and includes six phases running from idea conception to the finished product: development, pre-production, post-production, distribution, and exhibition (Honohaner, 2010, p. 1; Steiff, 2005, pp. 26–27). Based on the interview data, it seems that translation of Chinese films spans over the entire filmmaking process, from development to distribution and

exhibition. It covers an even more spread-out range than what O'Sullivan (2011, p. 13) claimed: "Translation may have a role to play at any stage of a film's production" as in the film production phase where translation is often conducted internally for international co-production (funding) and/or casting (O'Sullivan, 2011, p. 13; Romero-Fresco, 2019, p. 182). However, this study reveals that translation may also be triggered when films are in development, distributed overseas, or exhibited overseas or at home.

#### 4.1. Translation in Film Development Phase

In the development phase, the director or producer conceives an idea for a film, develops it into a presentable package, and tries to raise production funds to get the project into pre-production (Clevé, 2018, p. 5). Their inspiration for the film may come from an original screenplay, novel, stage play, short story, book, periodical, real-life story, pop song, or another motion picture (Clevé, 2018, p. 5; Grove, 2009, p. 12). Contemporary Chinese films by fifth- and sixth-generation directors mainly originate from Chinese local literature. Chen Kaige's film debut, *The Yellow Earth* (1984), is adapted from Chinese prose, i.e., *The Yellow Earth*, whereas his most representative work, *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), is based on Lilian Lee's novel of the same name. Similarly, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) is adapted from Nobel laureate Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum*, and another of his films, *Ju Dou* (1990), is based on Liu Heng's novel *Fuxi Fuxi*. In addition to being a writer, Liu worked as a screenwriter for many well-known Chinese films, including Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiuju* (1992) and *The Flowers of War* (2011) and Feng Xiaogang's war film *Assembly* (2007). The script of Feng's *Assembly* (2007) is adapted from Yang Jingyuan's novel *Lawsuit* and was written by Liu. Apart from Liu Heng, Feng's other filmmaking partner is Wang Shuo. For example, his comedy *The Dream Factory* (1997) is based on Wang Shuo's novel *You are not a Worldling*<sup>5</sup> (*nǐ búshì yígè sùrén*). Besides, Feng can also be inspired by his surrounding life. *Only Cloud Knows* (2019) by Feng is based on a true story of the director's old friend that happened in Canada, and the film was shot in New Zealand. However, Zhang's *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is adapted from the American film *Blood Simple* (1984) and did not originate from a local Chinese context.

Explaining the complex process of translating one of the 48 films under this study, P5 recalled that s/he began with translating the adaptation of a novel which was about 150 pages long. According to P5, it had not yet been turned into a screenplay and was like a novella, a short novel, or a short fiction. Nevertheless, since the director wished it to be converted into a film, it needed to be translated. Additionally, P5 thinks that the translation was done for the director's international production partners.

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<sup>5</sup> The English title is translated by the researcher.



They needed production partners around the world for special effects. They wanted to have a global production team. And so they needed more people to understand what the film would be about before the screenplay was actually written.

Eventually, it took a couple of years to move from the short story through a screenplay to the film (i.e., subtitling). P5 said, “It was a three-part process, probably over something like two years”. Speaking of a similar experience, P7 recalled an instance where s/he was invited to translate a novel first, and then the script when it was finished and the translated script was then used to negotiate cooperation or investment.

#### 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase

Production is taking a script and making a film, or, in other words, manufacturing an audiovisual product (Honohaner, 2010, p. 79). Technically, it encompasses only the activity of principal photography (Clevé, 2018, p. 9; Villarejo, 2007, p. 89). It begins with the submission of a completed screenplay or script, written by a screenwriter or the director. “A screenplay follows a common format and supplies full dialogue between characters, the locations of every numbered scene, and all of the action in the story” (Villarejo, 2007, p. 86).

Some directors prefer to write the script themselves or rewrite it as co-writers. For example, Jia Zhangke always creates screenplays by himself, and Feng Xiaogang has been credited as a screenwriter in his films. Feng worked as a screenwriter on his own in films such as *If You Are The One* (2008), and collaborated with his old friend Wang Shuo for films such as *A Sigh* (2000), *Father* (2000), *If You Are The One II* (2010), and *Personal Tailor* (2013). Qin (2010) studied Zhang Yimou’s adaptation of novels in his early films, *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *To Live* (1994), and discovered that three of the four novelists are credited as co-screenwriters in these films. Furthermore, Qin (2010) maintained that “Zhang’s input was crucial in shaping each of these scripts. In each film, Zhang himself was one of the screenwriters, although he was not listed in the credits” (p. 163).

Similarly, Chen Kaige is known to have been actively involved in producing the scripts for *The Yellow Earth* (1984), *King of the Children* (1987), *Life on a String* (1991), *The Promise* (2005), *Forever Enthralled* (2008), *Sacrifice* (2010), and *Caught in the Web* (2012). For instance, for *The Yellow Earth* (1984), after visiting north Shaanxi to experience the local area and search for the source of inspiration to rewrite the film script with the cinematographer Zhang Yimou, the art director He Qun, the scriptwriter Zhang Ziliang, and the composer Zhao Jiping, Chen Kaige carried out a major rewriting of the film, while staying in a small hostel on the outskirts of Beijing to focus more intensively on the script revisions (McDougall, 1991, pp. 26–31).

It is always believed that a good script is most likely to result in a good investment. Therefore, whether the financial situation is favourable or not, a good script will play a significant role in gaining funding (Honohaner, 2010, p. 409). That is why directors put such great effort into its creation. As

indicated by the interview data, during the film production phase, translation is carried out to seek foreign funds, producers, partners, or distributors. Thus, in many instances, translators are hired for script translation if international investment or cooperation is expected. As P10 explained:

Script translation happens when there is a final draft of the script out and the producers are either seeking foreign finances or inviting foreign cast and/or film crew to come on board. For instance, the producers may want to approach Michelle Yeoh to be the main lead and she doesn't read Chinese script, then an English script is needed for that purpose. It usually happens earlier in the production process as opposed to later.

It would be ideal if a translator/subtitler could conduct all the translating/subtitling activities pertaining to the film contents. However, not every translator can keep working on the same film translation project over such an extended period as P5, given that most of the interviewed translators or subtitlers work freelance or part-time. As addressed in the last section, P5 translated the film in question before the film production phase and followed up with screenplay and subtitle translations. Additionally, translators/subtitlers may have different preferences regarding translating scripts or subtitles.

P6 thinks that script translation is “very time-consuming work” and prefers to “hand on the whole script for translation”. When asked about collaborating with others in subtitling Chinese films into English, P6 replied that s/he only collaborates in translating scripts, which s/he does not have time to do alone, in case a director wants the whole script translated before the film is made for foreign producers. P6 added that s/he has two people s/he can rely on for such collaboration or handover. In contrast, as a professional in the film industry, P7 accepts more script translation projects than subtitling projects. S/he either translates scripts for blockbusters to raise money for her/his own documentaries or helps friends to render the scripts written by P7 and subtitle the films whose scripts P7 has written. When talking about a blockbuster made by one of the four selected directors, P7 guessed that its script translation might not have been used for financing since P7 believes that they already had enough investment at that time. P7 feels that the producer contacted P7 for script translation since there was a plan for the film to be distributed overseas.

To develop a screenplay or script that only includes dialogue and general scene descriptions into a shooting script, shot-to-shot descriptions need to be prepared, which is considered to be the director's domain (Bernstein, 1994, p. 244). While the producer is raising finance, the script may take various forms, such as a simple outline or synopsis, treatment<sup>6</sup>, or a screenplay with a scene-by-scene description of the action and accompanying dialogue (Bernstein, 1994, p. 244). P9 mentioned that s/he probably translated 10 or 15 shooting scripts altogether. In working on a film made by one of the four

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<sup>6</sup> A treatment, based on a film proposal, explains how the plot advances, how dramatic action unfolds and how characters function in terms of that structure; it can be developed into a script or screenplay (Villarejo, 2007, pp. 85–86). It is “a description of the proposed film as if it had just been viewed” (Bernstein, 1994, p. 244).



selected auteurs, P9 informed the researcher that they asked her/him to translate the script into English so they could raise money and sign up talents for the film.

In the meantime, independent filmmakers are inclined to obtain feedback from others for their script, have coverage done if possible (see E's response about journalists' involvement in 5.4. Other Stakeholders), and make necessary changes to get the script ready (Honohaner, 2010, p. 406). In China, "independent filmmaking should be understood as independent in relation to the state studio system rather than as a totally self-supporting practice"; this can be found in the sixth-generation directors' "grassroots" perspective (Lu, 2015, p. 175), such as the works of Jia Zhangke and Feng Xiaogang as in the context of this research. Translation paves the way for their films to go global and promotes their films' revenue in foreign markets. From a commercial perspective, producers also highly value translation quality. P7 talked about her/his disagreeable experience working for a producer who doubted the quality of her/his script translation. That producer used P7's script translation to negotiate with others but failed, which led to her/his mistrust of P7. Then, the producer found another person to translate the film synopsis and took it to the producer of the film series *The Lord of the Rings* to check both translations, but the final answer was that P7's translation was better. The producer's concern for the script translation quality is evident in that example.

Though it rarely happens, the producer might contact the translator regarding modifications or improvements made to the script since the "screenplay is one of the few art forms that is not complete when it's finished...until hundreds of artists put their stamp on it" (Seeger, 2019, p. 1). P7 commented that the script for one of the 48 films selected in the present research has been the longest script that s/he has translated. After some major modifications were made to the script, P7 needed to translate it again. Script changes occur throughout principal photography until post-production is completed, though "it would be ideal if all script changes could be made in the early stages of pre-production" (Honohaner, 2010, pp. 80–81). Hence, translation lasts throughout the whole production period. Similarly, P1 was commissioned to translate the director's script and confessed that her/his translation might not always match the film because some changes were made during the actual filming while P1 was not present.

Subtitling often occurs in post-production. The post-production process includes editing, looping, colour correction, scoring, and mixing (dubbing or subtitling) (Honohaner, 2010, p. 463, 477). Speaking of her/his subtitling experience, P8 said that, more often than not, the director is still refining the editing of the film while P8 is working on the subtitles. Similarly, P10 admits that s/he usually does her/his subtitle translation with the final cut or the latest cut when the production hires her/him to translate.

Based on the interview data, it was also discovered that accompanying materials for subtitling Chinese films include Chinese subtitles (in P3's case), Chinese dialogue lists (in the cases of P3, P4, P6, and P8), or Chinese scripts (in the cases of P2, P6, and P9). In addition, P8 requests the most literal English translation of a dialogue list. At the same time, seven interviewed subtitlers (P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, and P10) would work or would like to work with reference to a film copy. This contrasts with

what Romero-Fresco (2019) revealed, as shown below, and suggests that professional subtitlers for Chinese films made by established auteurs are likely to be able to access the adequate resources they need for their subtitling projects.

Despite the advice included in the new ISO Guidelines on Subtitling (ISO/IEC DIS 20071-23) for producers and filmmakers to make available pre-production material to translators, the latter hardly ever have access to pre-production documents such as pre-production scripts, treatments and shooting scripts. (Romero-Fresco, 2019, p. 183)

Like P5, other interviewees, including P3, P6, P7, and P9, have also translated both film scripts and subtitles independently or collaboratively. Sometimes, subtitlers' translations of Chinese dialogue are based on previous translators' script translations, as described by P5, P7, and P9. For example, P7 and two other individuals are credited together as English Translation for one of the 48 films chosen for the present study. When talking about this issue, P7 clarified that there was little discrepancy between the script P7 had translated and the film that had been finally shot, and the subsequent subtitlers probably adopted most of P7's script translation. Moreover, P9 mentioned a similar case in which P9 finished the script translation for a film but had to do other things, so P9's friend came in to do the subtitles based on P9's translation of the script. In this film, P9 is credited with English Script Translation, whereas P9's friend is credited with English Subtitles.

#### **4.3. Translation in Film Distribution and Exhibition Phases**

In the Zoom interview with P5, the researcher found that P5's name was not included in a film made by one of the four selected directors even though P5 admitted to being involved in its translation/subtitling. P5 explained the reason for this situation:

Sometimes when the films are purchased for distribution in different countries or regions, they change the translations, they redo them, they do different things...And because one of the things that I did try to make clear is that if they did change the translation that I don't want my name on it.

Working for the China Film Corporation<sup>7</sup> (hereafter CFC), P2 also noticed that sometimes the company that bought the film release rights from CFC chooses to subtitle it again. In another film by the same director, P5 is credited with Script Translation, while two other translators are credited with Subtitle Editing/Dialogue Translation. When asked how they collaborated for subtitling, P5 commented that the other translators might have come from the production team and the distribution company separately, and they both reviewed the translation P5 provided. According to

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<sup>7</sup> Until the late 1980s, the state-controlled CFC had still acted as the central distributor for all the films produced in Mainland China (Y. Zhu, 2002). In 1993, CFC would no longer purchase all the films produced by state studios, and the studios could distribute their films in their own way (May & Ma, 2014). In 1999, CFC directly under SARFT was integrated into the China Film Group Corporation, China's foremost film production and distribution enterprise (Yeh & Davis, 2008).

P5, the distribution company had their own Chinese-English translator, and what P5 had done was to provide materials as the film was being circulated for all sorts of audiences and going through many different hands. This is confirmed in the literature, as Ko (2007) proposes that the editing role played by a Chinese film distributor in Australia involves subtitle translation before screening Chinese films. Re-subtitling may happen even after an AVT product is released. For instance, bombarded with viewer criticism of English subtitles for *Squid Game*, Netflix appointed Sharon Choi to take a second look at the subtitles and she is now credited alongside the original subtitler Eun-sook Yoon (Deck, 2021; O'Hagan, 2021).

On occasion, subtitles are made specifically for film festivals since not every film will have a chance for theatrical release, especially in the case of independent film (indie) directors or early career filmmakers<sup>8</sup>. Working at CFC, P2 maintained that there was no distinction between versions prepared for film festivals and theatrical releases. After the great success of *The Yellow Earth* (1984) in Hong Kong in 1985, the demand for Chinese films at festivals suddenly grew, and subtitling was a major part of it, P2 said. P4 was approached because s/he had subtitled several high-profile films made by one of the four directors. Before the interview, the researcher conjectured that P4 should have been involved more in commercial films for cinema release than arty films for film festivals. Nevertheless, P4 replied that many of the films s/he subtitled were intended for international film festivals. Correspondingly, P8 also spoke of restoring a classic Chinese film at an international film festival where re-subtitling was required. However, P8's point was that the new subtitles replacing P8's original subtitles were inappropriate due to their vulgar register. Besides, P8 found that this instance of re-subtitling was undertaken without the director's knowledge or approval.

Talking about a specific subtitling experience, P5 notes that s/he once worked closely with an indie director who thought that subtitles were the key to his film receiving recognition in the international film circuit. According to P5's description, the subtitling process of cooperating with the director was an artistic process, which the director valued and P5 enjoyed. As they expected, that film had significantly wide distribution at film festivals in almost every continent. The director travelled for about two years from larger festivals like Berlin International Film Festival to some smaller ones around the world. P5 also accompanied the director on trips to several different film festivals. Afterwards, P5 mentioned a similar case in which the director also wanted her/his film to go to film festivals and came to P5 to work with her/him. In addition to subtitling films, P3 mentioned that s/he often helps translate other materials for film festivals and film markets, such as director, screenwriter and producer bios, synopses, character sketches, etc. P3 believed that it helped to have additional Chinese-language materials that P3 could translate, edit, and compile into a press packet.

Meanwhile, English subtitles are not only produced for overseas distribution but can also be found in Chinese films released in domestic cinemas and at international festivals held in China. "Chinese-produced films that are shown on VOD platforms and in cinema are often bilingually subtitled with

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the interviewees started to help the four selected directors translate their films long ago when they were up-and-coming young filmmakers.

both English and Chinese in the hope of boosting their international circulation” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 19). At the 21<sup>st</sup> Shanghai International Film Festival, the films made by the festival’s first jury chair, the late director Xie Jin, were screened to remember his great contribution to the Chinese film industry. The subtitler, Zhang Guohui<sup>9</sup>, subtitled three of his films in English for this international film festival, i.e., *Hibiscus Town* (1987), *The Herdsman* (1982), and *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (1957), and collated one film called *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1981) by Xie (Wu, 2018).

## 5. Multistakeholder Translation Process

The interview data inform us that subtitling Chinese films involves not only script translators, subtitle translators, or subtitle adaptors but also directors, producers, screenwriters, distributors, subtitle editors, and other stakeholders. Among them, directors, producers and, screenwriters are perceived as the key creative team in film production. As filmmakers, the director possesses the authority to decide every detail of the film as a work of art, and the producer oversees the film production and coordinates its various aspects. In conjunction with the director, the studio, and financiers, the producer contributes to “the script, cast and crew selections, production design, wardrobe, location selections, editing, musical score, marketing and so forth” (Honhaner, 2010, p. 2). As discussed in 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase, directors can sometimes be screenwriters.

### 5.1. Script Translators, Subtitle Translators, and Subtitle Adapters

In reality, the professional practice of subtitling is the result of a sustained team effort (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 37). Various specialists participate in the subtitling process, encompassing the spotters, the translators, the adaptors, proofers, revisers, QCers, and client managers (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, pp. 37–38). The spotter, or templator, “is responsible for the technical task of deciding the in and out times of the subtitles and for creating templates and master titles with relevant annotations for the translators” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 37). The translator is in charge of the language transfer, must have an excellent command of the source and target languages and cultures, and know the intricacies of shifting from speech to written text (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 37). The adaptor is “an expert in the media limitations that constrain subtitling and familiar with condensation and reduction strategies in the TL (target language)” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 37). Typically and ideally, a subtitler does spotting, translation, adaptation, and proofreading on their own (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 38).

As for Chinese films discussed in the present study, subtitles can be produced based on the English translations of the Chinese scripts (see 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase). Such a procedure

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<sup>9</sup> Zhang Guohui is not among the 10 interviewees.

indicates two groups of professionals involved in subtitling Chinese films, i.e., script translators<sup>10</sup> and subtitle translators. A collaboration of a native Chinese speaker and a native English speaker has been detected in the interview data obtained from both P2 and P8. As a native English speaker, P2 likes to collaborate with a native Chinese speaker; P2 believes that “the ideal subtitling process should always involve two native speakers, with good knowledge of the source culture and the target culture”. CFC, where P2 worked, had an English-language translation group. Their job was to translate subtitles and everything else into English and then hand them to an expert like P2 with sound advanced knowledge of English. This collaboration mode is not unique to Chinese-English AVT products. In Australia, the Special Broadcasting Service (hereafter SBS) corporation has a similar arrangement for subtitling in the major languages, i.e., “a mixture of native speakers of the source language and native English speakers fluent in that language who can and do consult one another constantly” (Mueller, 2001, p. 146). Furthermore, English-speaking P8 almost always works with a native Chinese speaker, usually the director, sometimes the scriptwriter, to ensure the exact meaning has been captured, and no nuances have escaped in the subtitling process. P8 also requested the most literal translation of the material (see 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase) and asked them not to attempt sophisticated English idioms, with annotations to indicate puns, nuances, outside references, etc. In some cases, a subtitler is not asked to produce the actual subtitles but is charged with translating dialogue exchanges without the consideration of technical constraints, and that translation then needs to go through a technical adaptation process (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 35). P8’s role resembles the adaptor defined by Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2021, p. 37). Besides, P8 works with a Chinese speaker who is fluent in English and belongs to the production team, usually the assistant director<sup>11</sup> who is able to answer most of P8’s additional questions. At the same time, P8 also frequently poses questions directly to the director.

P4, a native English speaker, has had a stable collaborative relationship with a native Chinese speaker on subtitles for one of the selected directors’ films. P4 remarked, “It’s fun to bounce ideas off each other, and I think we end up with tighter and more inspired subtitles than if we worked independently.” They each usually do a draft for half of the film, review each other’s work, and then do several revisions while watching the screener. They also work independently on other films. Among the 10 interviewees, P7 is one of the only two native Chinese speakers and has cooperated with her/his schoolfellow, a native English speaker helping P7 with proofreading.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the task of timing the subtitles is usually assigned to a specific person, as indicated in the interview data. Kapsaskis (2011) maintained that “the subtitling process consisted of two major tasks: a technical task, namely the timing of the subtitles, which involved no linguistic intervention, and the translation, directly from the audiovisual material” (p. 165). The

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<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, script translators also translate the story or novel from which the screenplay and the film are adapted, such as P5.

<sup>11</sup> “First assistant directors are the director’s right arm and the liaison between the director and the crew”, whereas second assistant directors work closely with casting, extra casting, and locations during pre-production (Honohaner, 2010, p. 4).

interviewed subtitlers are more involved in the translation tasks and less in technical tasks, as none of them had done the timing themselves. However, some of them will check the timing (P4, P6, and P8) or do prefer to get involved in it (P3 and P5).

## **5.2. Directors, Producers, and Screenwriters, and Other Film Crew**

In most cases, directors (sometimes also a screenwriter, as addressed in 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase) or producers usually initiate translation projects for Chinese films. Among the 10 interviewees, seven (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P9) mentioned that they were asked to translate film material personally by the directors. Besides, P7 said that most of her/his script translation projects for Chinese blockbusters came from their producers. Similarly, P10 is usually approached by producers if they know P10 personally. If not, a producer's assistant or someone in the production office would be the one to get in touch with P10. Sometimes, P3 gets referrals from producers and screenwriters, and P6 receives invitations from producers or crew members. Occasionally, P4 works for someone else on the production team and has not met the director in person, while the producer also may ask P8 to subtitle a film. As P8 added, even less often, s/he is asked by someone else connected with the film, such as a post-production supervisor or film production company. Nonetheless, no one has ever been assigned film translation jobs through translation agencies, which is one of the most distinct characteristics of professional translation practices found in the context of the auteur films investigated in this research. In the cases of P1 and P2, CFC played a vital role as a producer. It launched the subtitling project for the director while organising the English-language translator group, the foreign expert, and a Chinese native speaker working with the foreign expert etc., to contribute to this project.

Moreover, the key creative team and other members of the film crew help facilitate the script or subtitle translations. While translating the film scripts for one of the four selected directors, P1 received generous assistance from the director, who was described as always helpful in explaining the nature, background, and messages of his films. According to P1, "At times, I have been obliged to accept changes at the direction of the producer." Then, P1 added, "I did accept direction from the producer (or the producer's agent) in making subtitles where I claim no expertise."

In terms of help from the key creative team in translation, P3 maintained:

...I can certainly agree that my translation quality is better when I have access to the director/screenwriter/producer. The lower I am on the production chain, the worse my translation is. Access and dialogue is everything.

High-quality subtitles require close cooperation between translators and the key creative team (i.e., directors, producers, and screenwriters) of the film (Z. Zhu, 2021). According to P5, one of the four selected directors s/he used to cooperate with was involved in the subtitling process to some degree, but not like other directors s/he had worked with before. Instead, bilingual staff in the production team were organised to ensure the liaison between the director and the subtitler. However, when



the subtitles were done, P5 would watch the subtitled film with the director in the director's work studios. P6 mentioned that s/he occasionally receives guidelines specifying overall translation approaches. For example, one of the four directors is very specific about the length of the subtitle lines and sets the maximum of spaces in each line. Sometimes directors ask P6 to translate names literally, which is often not a great strategy in P6's opinion, so s/he argues with them. Additionally, P6 receives different kinds of feedback about the length, accuracy, and tone etc. of the subtitles, to which s/he is always open. However, if there is any disagreement, P6 will argue her/his point of view. Some directors whose English is good enough to check P6's work help prevent mistakes, and sometimes their feedback is thoughtful and helps improve the subtitles. Another director selected in this research also likes to go over the subtitles with P6, which is an enjoyable experience for her/him. P9 and the director studied in this research are friends with whom P9 worked closely. P9 translated two scripts for that director and subtitled one of them. As P9 described,

I mean we just worked as friends. There was no process...You know most films had been subtitled by Chinese people. So foreigners like me, we're just starting to help try to make the translation better, because the translations before the eighties, nineties, they were terrible. So we were trying to help the Chinese filmmakers do translation that could actually be understood and were more idiomatic.

Similarly, in describing P8's subtitling work, P8 mentioned, "I do this work only to help friends and filmmakers I like and admire." Additionally, P5 emphasised that it was rewarding to have a professional relationship like that with the director when talking about her/his close collaboration with the director in film translation and exhibition, which has been addressed in 4.3. Translation in Film Distribution and Exhibition Phases.

### **5.3. Distributors and Subtitle Editors**

After marketisation (see Footnote 7) was implemented to reform the film industry, CFC was no longer the only legitimate organisation to distribute Chinese films overseas. It means that the director or the producer will arrange one or several distributors at the beginning of the filmmaking project (see P7's response in 4.2. Translation in Film Production Phase). In such instances, an English synopsis or script could be translated when they look for overseas business partners and distributors. As P7 mentioned, an English synopsis script was even translated before the film was shot, as the producer had already started to seek a foreign partner or distributor at that time. Nonetheless, distribution usually takes place after film production, as demonstrated in P5's example about editing or re-subtitling P5's previous translation (see 4.3. Translation in Film Distribution and Exhibition Phases). Distributors may hire their own subtitlers to redo the translation, which falls within the distributor's responsibilities. For a foreign-language film, the distributor will be responsible for securing dubbing or subtitling (Honohan, 2010, p. 412). Based on his experience in translating and editing Chinese film subtitles in Australia, Ko (2007) concluded that film subtitles, whether newly or previously translated, may be further edited by the distributors. The reasons for the subsequent editing may

include “clarity of meaning, accurate interpretation, cultural adaptation, character portrayal, reduction of original dialogue, grammar, word choices and language expressions” (Ko, 2007, p. 9).

Some supportive evidence for another round of subtitling was discovered in Zhang Yimou’s film *Hero* (2002). This film, distributed by Miramax, shows two subtitlers credited separately. One subtitler is listed after script supervisors and among the film crew, while the other appears after the post-production team. It seems to prove the presence of a second round of subtitling activity by the distribution company, whose concern substantially lies in box office profits and differs from the director or producer’s pursuit of the balance between aesthetics and earnings. Alternatively, these two subtitlers might be employed by different distributors. This is because, in English-speaking countries, four distributors are involved in the film *Hero* (2002), Miramax, Buena Vista International, Alliance Atlantics Communications, and Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, as shown in the IMDb webpage of the film’s company credits<sup>12</sup>.

#### 5.4. Other Stakeholders

In the present study, other stakeholders refer to anybody contributing to the translation of the Chinese films’ English subtitles. For example, journalists may have a role in the director’s decision on how to translate the title of a film. In the case of translating an indie film, P5 and the director had many discussions about the title until they decided on one version. Subsequently, the director shared the translated title with approximately 10 journalists, who gave feedback on the translation. According to P5, in Beijing, directors would like to invite journalists after their films are translated, as they are hoping that the English media will write about their films. The directors might ask the journalists to view their films even before the film has finished its final cuts. In addition, English-speaking film critics may be invited to comment on some translation issues, which will, in return, influence new translation issues for the subtitlers.

At the same time, the creative team is not the only stakeholder that contributes to producing the most appropriate translations. As a professional translator/subtitler, P3 also tried to cast her/his net as wide as possible by conferring with directors, screenwriters, producers, editors, fellow translators, experts, and others to create the best possible translation. P3 gave two examples of such a subtitling process. When there was a scene about a medical procedure, P3 tried to ask a doctor who spoke both Chinese and English. If there was a scene in which people are playing mah-jong, P3 attempted to find a bilingual friend who knew the rules and strategies of mah-jong. With a wide network, P3 also got referrals from editors, film festival programmers, or other friends, apart from those from directors or producers directly.

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299977/companycredits/>

Similarly, P5 would like to “do some research” and “try to talk to others who might be more knowledgeable” to achieve accurate translations. When dealing with the Chinese military language, P5 worked with a professional in military studies to ensure that her/his rendition was “authentic and sounded like the way people talk in the military in English”. This kind of consultation is not only sought by English translators for Chinese films but is also described in Mueller’s (2001) example of subtitling a German film in the Australian context, highlighting the importance of field knowledge.

## 6. Subtitling Quality

Multiple phases of translation/subtitling processes for high-profile Chinese films by selected auteurs naturally involve several rounds of self-revisions or revisions by someone else. Most errors can be avoided through such a multiphase process, and errors are always weighted significantly in subtitling quality assessment models such as NTR (Romero-Fresco & Pöchhacker, 2017) and FAR (Hagström & Pedersen, 2022; Pedersen, 2017). The NTR model grades errors of translation (T) and recognition (R) with N standing for the number of words in the subtitles (Romero-Fresco & Pöchhacker, 2017), whereas the FAR model calculates the errors in the aspects of Functional equivalence, Acceptability, and Readability. Suppose a translator/subtitler is involved in story translation, screenplay translation, and subtitle translation for a particular film, like P5. In that case, s/he will consciously or subconsciously modify and improve her/his previous translations/subtitles. In such a translation/subtitling process, both the translator and the key creative team are allowed adequate time to work around the problems that might arise from the translation/subtitling. In P3’s opinion, directors, producers, cinematographers, and screenwriters are better advised to bring in the translator/subtitler at the earliest possible stage. If they strategise at the earliest stages, there will be many ways to work around the translation/subtitling issues. P4 detects the evidence of such approaches being taken: Currently, filmmakers involve subtitlers earlier in the post-production process rather than a few weeks or even a few days before the film needs to be submitted to a festival. In P4’s opinion, this gives the subtitler more time to work with the text and find more subtle ways of conveying cultural background instead of sacrificing nuance for time. Nevertheless, it also means additional rounds of revisions since the final cut has not been made, but P4 thinks it is a fair deal to accomplish good subtitling quality.

Multiple stakeholders involved in translation/subtitling processes help to guarantee the quality of the final AVT products. On the one hand, the subtitling quality can benefit from the collaboration between the native Chinese and native English speakers (see the cases of P2, P4, P7, and P8 in 5.1 Script Translators, Subtitle Translators, and Subtitle Adapters), the communication between the translator and the key creative team or other production members (see the cases of P1, PC, P5, P6, P8, and P9 in 5.2. Directors, Producers, and Screenwriters, and Other Film Crew), and the consultation with film professionals and field experts (see the cases of P3 and P5 in 5.4. Other Stakeholders). On the other hand, distributors will further scrutinise the subtitling quality under their criteria. As addressed in 5.3. Distributors and Subtitle Editors, distributors may launch re-subtitling projects by recruiting subtitle editors. At the quality control stage, the subtitle editor from the distributors will

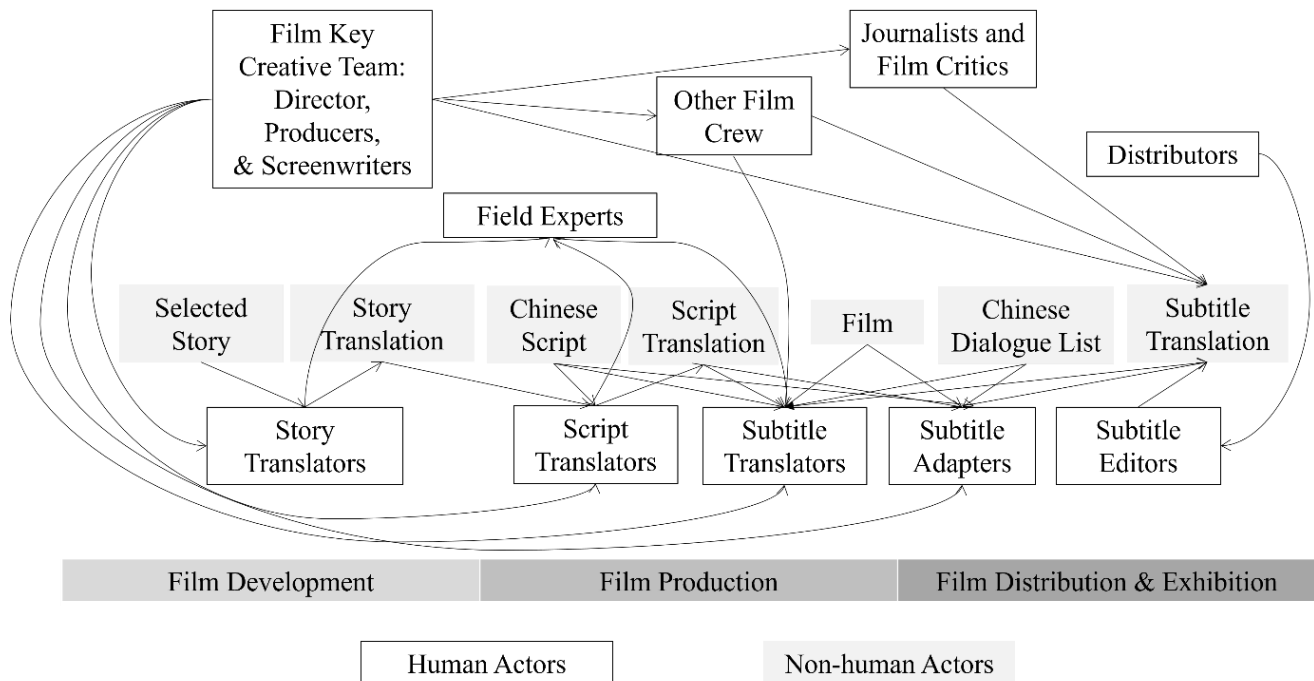
also “correct routine errors, check subtitling conventions and ensure house-style consistency” as well as “detect more subtle hindrances to the flow of the subtitles” (James, 2001, p. 161). The subtitle editor checks if the subtitler has made the most effective choices between the different factors at play (James, 2001, p. 161). Mueller (2001) summarises the subtitling quality at SBS that:

Comes from a combination of measurable standards for the judicious selection, training and monitoring of the best possible candidates and more subtle standards which are virtually impossible to measure but the absence of which is obvious (p. 148).

The subtlety in subtitling (James, 2001; Mueller, 2001), the intertwined parameters in subtitling quality (Kuo, 2020; Robert & Remael, 2016), and the interwoven factors influencing subtitling quality (Abdallah, 2011; Chen, 2004) entail more time to deal with and more perspectives to preview, view, and review. It means initiating film translation as early as possible in filmmaking and incorporating different stakeholders to solve translation problems whenever necessary. In translating Chinese auteur films aiming for international awards, the multiphase and multistakeholder processes described in this paper can meet such high expectations. Additionally, translators’/subtitlers’ access to adequate materials needed for their projects facilitates the best practice in subtitling Chinese films by professionals. To illustrate the multiphase and multistakeholder process more explicitly, this research has adopted ANT to elicit a network of human and non-human actors interconnected at different phases of filmmaking. As shown in Figure 1, these actors contribute to translating and disseminating high-profile Chinese films by the studied auteurs through ensuring the quality of English subtitles for these films.

**Figure 1**

*A Network of Actors Ensuring the Subtitling Quality*



Source: author's own elaboration.

Multiple stakeholders are involved in the network of subtitling quality assurance. According to Robert and Remael (2016), quality assurance is the same as quality control as defined by Mossop (2014):

The full set of procedures not just after (as with quality assessment) but also before and during the translation production process, by all members of a translating organisation, to ensure that quality objectives important to clients are being met (p. 129).

Herein, the audiences can be perceived as the ultimate clients for the English subtitles. These stakeholders cater to the audiences' better understanding of films and better watching experiences by contributing their expertise, incorporating other professionals or experts whenever necessary, and helping each other. To ensure the success of this endeavour, accompanying materials that are generated by the production team are also offered to the translators/subtitlers when they need or request them, and previous translations/subtitles form the basis for the following subtitling project. Furthermore, translation assets have been recycled and reused to realise their maximum value for film translation projects.

## 7. Conclusion

Though projects in subtitling are in most cases notorious for tight deadlines, subtitling a Chinese film might be allowed more time if it is not bound for a film festival opening in a few days or weeks. From the interview data, it can be inferred that high-profile Chinese films by specific auteurs are generally prepared to take time to produce high-quality subtitles. With adequate scheduling, more stakeholders (see 5.2. Directors, Producers, and Screenwriters, and Other Film Crew, 5.3. Distributors and Subtitle Editors, and 5.4. Other Stakeholders) can have a chance to play a part in shaping the final subtitling products beyond script translators, subtitle translators, and subtitle adapters. The coexistence of script translators, subtitle translators, subtitle adapters, and subtitle editors also implies a lengthy and sometimes multithread translation/subtitling process. The subtitling activity can be traced back to script translation since subtitles may be produced on the basis of the translated film script. A literal English translation of the original dialogue spoken in the film can be offered to a subtitle adapter who focuses on the technical constraints in subtitling. A subtitle editor is sometimes employed by the film distributor to localise and revise the previous subtitles provided by the film production team. These stakeholders or actors contribute to the English subtitles of Chinese films at different filmmaking stages, from film development through film production to film distribution and exhibition. The actors who directly carry out translation/subtitling are typically not engaged in the entirety of the prolonged translation process. Instead, they can be the same professionals who follow up the whole translation process as script translators, subtitle translators, and subtitle adapters, or they can collaborate as either the combination of script translator and subtitle translator or that of subtitle translator and subtitle adapter. To achieve a subtitling product with gold standards in their eyes, these executants of translation/subtitling activities will incorporate more stakeholders to overcome the difficulties encountered in the translation process. Such tangled strings of actors, who interact with each other at certain phases of filmmaking projects, set up an intangible system of subtitling quality control and pave the way for the international dissemination and acknowledgement of these subtitled films.

However, subtitling quality may be perceived differently, for example, in the context of directors' artistic pursuit, producers' overall management, distributors' quest for profits, translators' linguistic focus, subtitle editors' technical concern, etc. These perspectives all play a part in safeguarding the overall quality of the final subtitling products displayed before the audience. It seems to entail issues torn between arts and profits or linguistic accuracy and technical constraints. The simplest expectation of this process is that errors will be filtered out through these various eyes and hands. Additionally, the compromise and balance finally reached in these dilemmas find their reflection in discussions on the subtlety in subtitling (James, 2001; Mueller, 2001) as well as the slippery (Szarkowska et al., 2021) and complex (Hagström & Pedersen, 2022; Pedersen, 2017) concept of quality. The multiphase feature of translation processes in subtitling Chinese films, as identified in the present study, comparatively allows adequate time for translators/subtitlers to complete their tasks satisfactorily.



Nonetheless, the multiphase and multistakeholder translation/subtitling processes have been mapped out from the perspective of a single actor, a translator/subtitler. Future research may concentrate on interviewing other actors identified in the network, such as directors or producers, who are involved in the translation/subtitling processes from the film production side. Additionally, the research survey has not detected any translation technology (e.g., subtitling software) applied in the translation process. Although technology-assisted subtitling has already been widely used in the language services industry, technology seems to be rarely adopted in subtitling Chinese films as far as auteur films are concerned. In future research, the scope of subtitling software can be explored specifically among Chinese-English film translators/subtitlers, particularly those contributing to commercial or popular Chinese films as opposed to art house films.

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