

The Patriotism and the Heroism Embedded in the Subtitles of Chinese-English Movies: The Mission of “Main Melody” Films

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: April 02, 2020

Accepted: June 20, 2020

Published: July 31, 2020

Volume: 8 Issue: 3

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Keywords:

Chinese Communist Party,
Ideology,
“Main Melody” Film,
Patron,
Subtitles

ABSTRACT

The dissemination of audiovisual products has played an indispensable role in shaping ideological propaganda and national influence in China. The “Main Melody” are the films that serve to propagandize the mainstream ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a typical example of this genre, *Wolf Warrior II* (《战狼2》) (2017) has been the top-grossing film in the Chinese mainland since its release in July 2017. The science fiction film *The Wandering Earth* (《流浪地球》) (2019), with its subtle implication of “Main Melody”, quickly ranks as the third. Meanwhile, the action movie *Operation Red Sea* (《红海行动》) (2018), which advocates the element of “Main Melody”, has been ranked fifth in the Chinese mainland box office. In this paper, I will move beyond the conventional linguistic research in audiovisual translation to focus on the ideology revealed through the subtitles of this specific film genre. By considering the movies as multilingual texts targeted for both Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences, I seek to explore the ideology reflected in the subtitles of the films by probing into several questions through the paper including: What stereotyped image does China still hold towards the West? What kind of image does the CCP and the Chinese government attempt to portray China as in the mind of Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences?

INTRODUCTION: “MAIN MELODY” FILMS

In 1989, the release of the film *The Founding Ceremony of The Nation* (《开国大典》) (1989) in China marked that the gene of “Main Melody” film officially entered the stage of the Chinese film industry. According to the definition of the official Chinese media People.cn and Xinhua news agency, “Main Melody” film mainly refers to the film that serves to convey the Chinese nation’s “truth, goodness, and beauty” (People.cn 2017) as well as “social positivity” (Xinhuanet.com 2017). To be specific, there are three types of “Main Melody” films. The first type focuses on specific historical events, such as *The Founding Ceremony of The Nation*, which portrays Mao Zedong and other significant Communist officials inaugurating the People’s Republic of China at Tiananmen; and *The Founding of a Republic* (《建国大业》) (2009), which tells a series of important events between the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (7 July 1937 – 9 September 1945) and the eve of the founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949. The second type concentrates on specific characters. For example, the movie *Jiao Yulu* (《焦裕禄》) (1990) tells how Jiao Yulu, as a Chinese politician and an honest Party cadre, serves the people wholeheartedly and selflessly by devoting his life to the Communist State. The third type is more like a combination of the first two, and it focuses on the positive heroic images of China

in fictional disasters by highlighting the braveness of certain Chinese characters. The representatives of this type are *Operation Mekong* (《湄公河行动》) (2016), *Operation Red Sea* (《红海行动》) (2018), *Wolf Warrior II* (《战狼2》) (2017), and *The Wandering Earth* (《流浪地球》) (2019). The “Main Melody” of these three types can be specifically modified and created based on different themes, but the purpose of ideological propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government has never changed.

PATRONAGE IN AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

According to the definition by Lefevere, patronage can be exerted by “groups of persons, a religious body, a political party, a social class, a royal court, publisher, and, last but not least, the media” (Lefevere, 2016: 15). As the ones that have “power and political dominance” (Díaz Cintas, 2012: 282), patrons can “further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting” (Lefevere 2016: 15), which uncovers the extralinguistic elements under the socio-political as well as the ideological environment that spreads into all social activities, including audiovisual translation (Díaz Cintas, 2012: 282).

Stanley Rosen, a professor at the University of Southern California who studied Chinese society and cinema ex-

pressed his views on the “Main Melody” film of *Wolf Warrior II*. Unlike those who believe that the film is made solely to promote the “hawkish patriotism” (Chris 2017) proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Rosen believes that the film also highlights personal heroism as advocated by Hollywood movies. He declares that this Chinese film is not a traditionally typical “patriotic film” advocating collectivism as it also presents a “very individualist personal quest” which falls into the value of “Hollywood” style, and “downplay[s]” the CCP in favor of patriotism as well as heroism (ibid.). However, in China, the most significant aspect of patriotism is to love CCP, criticizing the CCP equates to being unpatriotic (Chen 2014). Patriotism has always been bound up with the official narrative, which calls for support for the CCP and the regime. At the same time, patriotism has been increasingly employed in the context of nationalism. When it is necessary for the patron to incite xenophobia or to crack down on citizens who identify with Western values, the national connotation within the patriotic context will be revealed as well as addressed intentionally.

There is no doubt that the dissemination of audiovisual translation works is closely related to the social, political, and cultural background. The CCP, as the ultimate patron in the context of Chinese social-political culture, also plays a decisive role in audiovisual works’ subtitle translation. Especially under the premise of ‘social positivity’ advocated by the “Main Melody”, subtitle translation in “Main Melody” films also shows the absolute dominance of the political patron in audiovisual works from different aspects, and reflects the social ideology required by the political patron in turn.

In the next section, with the case study, I seek to explore the ideology reflected in the subtitles of the films by probing into several questions: What stereotyped image does China still hold towards the West? What kind of image does the CCP and the Chinese government attempt to portray China as in the mind of Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences?

REPRESENTATIVES OF “MAIN MELODY” FILMS: *WOLF WARRIOR II*, *OPERATION RED SEA*, AND *THE WANDERING EARTH*

Wolf Warrior II (2017), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *The Wandering Earth* (2019) are the representative works of Chinese “Main Melody” films. As of September 10, 2020, according to the “Box Office Ranking in Chinese Mainland” (Maoyan.com, 2020), *Wolf Warrior II* ranks first, *The Wandering Earth* ranks third, and *Operation Red Sea* ranks fifth. All of the three movies boast excellent box office records in the Chinese mainland, with that of *Wolf Warrior II* grossing 831 million USD, *The Wandering Earth* 684 million USD, and *Operation Red Sea* 533 million USD (ibid.). The popularity of these films in the Chinese market reflects the absolute dominance of “Main Melody” films in the Chinese film industry in recent years.

All of the three stories are unfolded on the theme of ‘China saves the world’. In *Wolf Warrior II*, the protagonist Leng Feng, who is a former soldier from a Chinese

elite special force named Wolf Warriors, travels to an unnamed Africa country but gets caught in the middle of a civil war between government troops and armed rebels, also aided by white mercenaries, who are led by a violent American nicknamed “Big Daddy”. With the help of the Chinese Navy, Leng Feng rescues African and Chinese civilians and defeats the white mercenaries; *The Wandering Earth* tells the story about Earth’s migration to a new solar system to escape annihilation. When the sun dies out, the people of Earth have to build giant thrusters to propel the planet out of orbit and sail to a new star system, during which several young Chinese have solved a fatal technical problem in this grand project; *Operation Red Sea* portrays the braveness of the Chinese Navy’s elite special force Jialong Unit 1, who successfully evacuate their fellow citizens in the fictional Middle Eastern state of Yewaire on the Arabian Peninsula amidst threats from a terrorist group and violent coup.

As both Chinese characters and English-speaking characters appear in all three films, the source language in a dialogue may be Chinese or English, and the target audience may be Chinese audiences or English-speaking audiences. Therefore, by regarding the three films as multilingual texts targeting both Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences, I will analyze typical subtitle cases one by one.

Wolf Warrior II

Example 1:

<i>Wolf Warrior II</i> (1: 08: 47)	
SL (Source Language)	TT (Target Language)
反叛军: we know you are not a soldier anymore,	The rebel: 你已经不是军人了,
反叛军: what the fuck are you fighting for?	The rebel: 他妈的还那么拼干嘛!
冷锋: 一朝为战狼, 终生是战狼!	Leng Feng: once a wolf warrior, always a wolf warrior!

In this scene, the rebel forces entered the factories where many Chinese and African workers were located in an attempt to find their enemy — the protagonist Leng Feng. In the close fight between Leng Feng and a member of the rebel army, they had the above conversation. The rebel leader asked questions in English and Leng Feng answered it in Chinese, which results in the logical inconsistency of the plot. In fact, the purpose of subtitle translation in this scene is to convey to the world that the former Chinese soldiers represented by Leng Feng are willing to devote themselves to serve the people in the face of crisis, which reveals their ‘loyalty’ towards the Chinese nation. “Once a wolf warrior, always a wolf warrior” — this slogan-like English subtitle presents the ‘positivity’ that the patron of the CCP intends to emphasize. Obviously, this scene depicts the rebel forces as violent dispute-provoking ‘invaders’ while presents Chinese people’s patriotism and heroism through subtitles.

Example 2:

<i>Wolf Warrior II (15: 03)</i>	
SL	TL
龙小云：为什么当兵？	Long Xiaoyun: why did you join the army?
冷锋：当兵后悔两年，	Leng Feng: join the army, regret it for two years,
冷锋：不当兵后悔一辈子。	Leng Feng: don't join the army, regret it for life.

In this scene, the protagonist Leng Feng recalled his reason for joining the army. These subtitles are intended to convey to both Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences the “military professional attraction and military sense of honor” (Zhang and Zhu, 2016), which has been intensely revealed through the subtitle of “不当兵后悔一辈子” (Don't join the army, regret it for life) with its incendiary implication. Therefore, the subtitle of this scene, as Leng Feng's personal experience, reflects the image of Chinese soldiers that the movie's ultimate patron intends to create and vigorously praise — “sincere dedication without complaints and regrets” (Kknews.cc 2015).

Example 3:

<i>Wolf Warrior II (56: 58)</i>	
SL	TL
中国工人：我老婆嫁给我，她就是中国人。 Back Translation: she married me, so she is Chinese.	Chinese factory worker: she married me, so she's one of us.

As the rebel forces led by Big Daddy started to covet the factory where Chinese workers and African workers were located, Chinese managers in the factory prepared to organize the evacuation of Chinese workers first. During the evacuation, one of the Chinese workers asked to leave with his African wife. In this scene, the subtitler translates “她就是中国人” (She is Chinese) into “she's one of us”, which reflects an ordinary Chinese husband's sense of responsibility towards his family. What's more, from the protection of an ordinary Chinese for his foreign wife at a time of crisis, the subtitler aims to reinforce the “responsible international image” (Cpcnews.cn, 2020) of China under the leadership of the CCP, and China's global influence of being able to make quick as well as virtuous judgment in dilemma.

The Wandering Earth

Example 1:

In this scene, the protagonist Liu Peiqiang's mission in the fictional Navigation Platform International Space was about to be completed. Liu Peiqiang and his Russian colleague, Markarov, had some imagination about their future life after returning to the earth, during which they had the above conversation. It is worth noting that the dialogue in this scene shows the global popularity of Chinese culture represented by certain Chinese food. When Liu Peiqiang suggested that they might consider going to the world-famous tourist attraction of Lake Baikal in the future, Markov

<i>The Wandering Earth : Scene 1 (09:07)</i>	
SL	TL
韩朵朵：户口，晚上居委会会发饺子吧？	Duoduo: Hu Kou, committee is giving out dumplings tonight?
<i>The Wandering Earth : Scene 2 (57:40)</i>	
SL	TL
刘培强：我们还要带着孩子们，	Liu Peiqiang: we want to take our kids
刘培强：去贝加尔湖上钓鲑鱼呢。	Liu Peiqiang: go salmon fishing on Lake Baikal.
Markarov: 那还不如去重庆吃火锅呢。	Markarov: I'd rather have hotpot in Chongqing.

from Russia said that he preferred to have a taste of “hotpot” (Note 1), a specialty of Chongqing City in southwest China. Therefore, the subtitles have shown the positive influence and popularity of Chinese elements in the world.

Example 2:

<i>The Wandering Earth (23: 48)</i>	
SL	TL
蒂姆：我蒂姆，我爸北京的，我妈墨尔本的。	Tim: I am Tim, my dad is from Beijing, and my mom is from Melbourne.
蒂姆：中澳合资。	Tim: a Sino-Australian joint product.

In *The Wandering Earth*, as a Chinese-Australian hybrid, Tim humorously emphasized that he was a “Sino-Australian joint product” in this scene, highlighting the ‘international background’ of the film. Besides, Tim has been stressing that he is a “Chinese” and has a “Chinese heart” in the film. Thus, the subtitle translation implies China's influence and power in the international arena. Tim's ‘patriotic passion’ for China once again confirms the undeniable ‘global influence’ advocated by the CCP.

Example 3:

<i>The Wandering Earth (1:20:40)</i>	
SL	TL
李一一：有人还记得著名的“春节十二响”吗？	Li Yiyi: does anyone recall the famous 12 Chimes of Spring?
李一一：那程序我写的，	Li Yiyi: I wrote that program.
李一一：我会用它覆盖之前的程序，	Li Yiyi: I'm going to use it to override the system,
李一一：这样就可以获得控制权了。	Li Yiyi: so that we'll be able to take control.

In *The Wandering Earth*, when everyone thought that The Wandering Earth project failed and the mankind was about to face extinction, young Chinese programmer Li Yiyi thought of using the firework program that he designed for the Chinese Spring Festival Gala (Note 2) to regain the control of the operating system, and then save the world from annihilation. In this scene, “the famous 12 Chimes of Spring” realizes the salvation of the world through Chinese elements, which serves to emphasize the intelligence displayed by young Chinese technicians, China's powerful

science and technology, and China's incomparable global influence.

Compared with Li Yiyi's wisdom in crisis, more foreign teams would not even try to take any actions after knowing the 'doomed failure' of humankind. Thus, it further highlights the calmness and wisdom of young Chinese programmers represented by Li in the face of major global crises while downplays the ability of 'foreigners' to deal with emergencies and their psychological endurance with subtlety.

Operation Red Sea

Example 1:

Operation Red Sea (2:15:37)	
SL	TL
中国海军：注意，我是中国海军，	Chinese Navy: attention, this is Chinese Navy,
中国海军：你即将进入中国领海，请立即离开	Chinese Navy: you are about to enter Chinese waters, please turn around immediately.

After Jiaolong Unit 1 successfully rescued all the Chinese citizens from the threat of a violent coup and terrorist organization, the camera shot slowly turned to the South China Sea. The South China Sea dispute, which mainly exists among Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and China, has always been the concern of the world, and up to now, there is no universally recognized conclusion regarding this dispute (Ian, 2020). Therefore, the subtitle intends to convey the message to the world that "China's territorial sovereignty cannot be violated" (Han and Hu, 2016), and 'Chinese power and strength should not be underestimated', which has been reflected through both the source language as well as the target language. In all, this scene assumes foreigners as 'intruders' to portray the patriotism and heroism of the Chinese Navy.

Example 2:

Operation Red Sea (1:18:44)	
SL	TL
女记者：我要跟恐怖组织干到底，	I will fight to the bitter end.
女记者：我不怕死亡，	I'm not afraid of death,
女记者：我怕的是没有任 何办法	I'm afraid there's nothing I can do.

In *Operation Red Sea*, a Chinese female battlefield reporter went to Yewaire for reporting the coup with her colleague. When her colleague unfortunately died in the gunfight between Jiaolong Unit 1 and the terrorist organization, she couldn't help but vent her frustration. The fear of being unable to help those around her at a critical time makes her "not afraid of death", through which the patron of the CCP is intended to highlight the 'selfless dedication' of ordinary Chinese people in various professions and their 'bravery' as well as 'heroic spirit'.

CONCLUSION

In China, the dominant patron and the ultimate controller in the film industry are the CCP, that is, the supreme power of

the Chinese government. This particular social and political environment of China strengthens the interlingual subtitling of "Main Melody" films represented by *Wolf Warrior II*, *Operation Red Sea*, and *The Wandering Earth* to be the instrument of ideological propaganda of the CCP and the Chinese government, while the ideology mentioned here cannot be simplified as the general idea of 'nationalism'. What the subtitler attempts to create is a positive image with particular characteristics in front of the world through the typical subtitle cases in these "Main Melody" films.

Most of the typical subtitle cases in 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 of this paper have been rendered through the direct translation strategy without increasing or reducing the original meaning of the source language, which reflects the 'patriotism' and the 'heroism' of Chinese soldiers and ordinary people from all walks of life. From the Chinese subtitle and the English subtitle of these three films, I argue that the CCP and the Chinese government intend to create the Chinese image with power and strength, global influence and responsibility, loyalty and selfless dedication in the hearts of both Chinese audiences and English-speaking audiences. Meanwhile, the subtitles serve to perpetuate the stereotype of the Westerners being the bullies and the invaders in Chinese audiences' mindsets while downplay the abilities of 'foreigners' to deal with major crises. Thus, the three "Main Melody" films not only "meet the spiritual needs of Chinese people in the current era" (Yin 2017), but realize the ideological expression under the supervision of the CCP and the Chinese government in subtitle translation as well.

END NOTES

- Hotpot is a specialty in Chongqing, China. Normally, it is prepared with a simmering pot of soup at the dining table with various raw foods ready to be cooked.
- The Spring Festival Gala is a televised variety show that broadcast from 8 p.m. till midnight on the Chinese New Year's Eve, which has been an integral part of the Spring Festival since 1983. With a mix of dance and songs, comedy acts, magic etc., the show is tailored to amuse Chinese people of all ages from all walks of life, and it enjoys particular popularity from all over China

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