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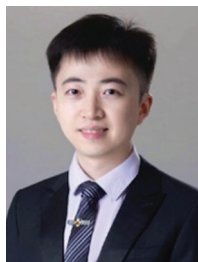
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Film Translation for International Audiences: In Conversation with Professor Haina Jin

Haina Jin  and Huihuang Jia 



Haina Jin is a professor of translation, cinema, and transcultural studies at the Communication University of China. Her research interests include film translation, translation history, and film history. She is the co-editor of the *Journal of Chinese Film Studies* (De Gruyter) and the co-editor of the *Routledge Series in Chinese Cinema*. Her representative publications include *Towards a History of Translating Chinese Silent Films (1905–1949)* (Peking University Press, 2013), *Chinese Cinemas in Translation and Dissemination* (Routledge, 2021), and *Chinese Film Abroad: Translation and Distribution* (co-edited with Yves Gambier, Routledge, 2024). She has translated and proofread numerous influential audiovisual works, including *Full River Red* (满江红) and *Avatar: The Way of Water*. She is also the vice president and secretary general of the Audiovisual Translation and Dissemination Council of China Federation of Radio and Television Associations (中国广播电视社会组织联合会影视译制与传播委员会).



Huihuang Jia is a PhD researcher at the Centre for Translation Studies, University College London, where he also serves as a postgraduate teaching assistant in modules related to audiovisual translation. In addition, he leads language-specific sessions on subtitling, supervises MA/MSc dissertations, and convenes a module on dubbing for a postgraduate summer course. His publications have appeared in journals, including


Babel, Translation and Interpreting Studies, Perspectives, The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, and *LANS-TTS*. He is a production editor of the *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* and also works as an audiovisual translator and proofreader for films shown in cinemas. He is currently co-editing a book on audiovisual translation (Routledge) with Professor Jorge Díaz-Cintas.

Jia: Professor Jin, you are a leading scholar in audiovisual translation in China, particularly in film translation. Could you please tell us how you first became involved in this area of research?

Jin: My interest in film translation research began during my PhD studies in English Language and Literature at Peking University, focusing on translation. When selecting a topic for my dissertation, I aimed to identify an area that was under-researched and of scholarly significance. Around that time, my supervisor, Professor Shusen Liu (刘树森), invited Professor Zhengqi Ma (麻争旗), from the Communication University of China, to deliver a talk on film translation. Professor Ma's work focuses on the Chinese translation of foreign films, as outlined in his book *Scenario Translation & Dubbing* (影视译制概论).

After his talk, I asked why he had not studied the translation of Chinese films into other languages. He replied that this was beyond the capacity of Chinese scholars. I found this response surprising. If we could research the translation of Chinese literature, why not Chinese films? That question marked the beginning of my research path.

In 2005, when China commemorated the centenary of its film industry, a range of documen-

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taries on the history of Chinese cinema were broadcast. On one occasion, I watched *Laborer's Love* (劳工之爱情), a 1922 silent film widely regarded as the oldest extant Chinese film. To my surprise, it featured bilingual subtitles presented in a format that differs considerably from contemporary practices. I realized that even in the early twentieth century, when Chinese cinema was still in its infancy, filmmakers were already thinking about how to make their films accessible to international audiences. This discovery sparked my curiosity.

I then examined other early Chinese films from the 1920s and 1930s and found that nearly all extant films from this era featured bilingual subtitles. Yet, the translation of Chinese films for international audiences had received little attention in both translation and film studies. I saw a clear gap in research and considered making it the focus of my PhD. When I discussed the idea with Professor Liu, he agreed it was original and promising.

At first, I had ambitious plans to cover over 100 years of Chinese film translation, starting from 1905. However, after discussions with my supervisor and academic reviewers during the proposal stage, I realized the scope was too broad. Given that China produces several hundred films each year, undertaking such a complex and wide-ranging study would be unmanageable within the scope of a PhD thesis. I decided to narrow the focus to the period between 1905 and 1949, concentrating specifically on the English translation of Chinese silent films. The year 1905 marks the production of *The Conquering of the Dingjun Mountain* (定军山), widely considered the first Chinese film. The year 1949 signals the founding of the People's Republic of China, which brought major changes to the film industry regarding production, distribution, and more.

Jia: While writing your first monograph, *Towards a History of Translating Chinese Silent Films (1905–1949)* (中国无声电影翻译研究), what key discoveries or turning points shaped your thinking in the early stages of the project? Could you please share any particular challenges or breakthroughs that stood out during your initial investigations?

Jin: In my experience, PhD research should not be seen as ending with graduation. It can serve as a solid foundation for future work. My monograph, which was developed from my doctoral thesis and published in 2013, focuses on the translation of Chinese silent films from 1905 to 1949 and is situated within the fields of translation history and film history.

In historical research, the primary goal is to innovate through source material, that is, to discover, organize, and effectively use historical resources that have not yet been widely examined. Based on this foundation, the next objective is to offer new and meaningful scholarly insights by reframing existing perspectives. In the book, I paid particular attention to the reasons behind the vibrant film translation activities of the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, Chinese film companies had two purposes in translating their productions: the potential profit obtained from international markets, and the desire to change the negative image of Chinese people portrayed in Hollywood films by projecting a positive image of China. Driven by these two objectives, Chinese film companies placed considerable emphasis on translation quality and hired both Chinese translators and foreign translators to translate their productions. The intertitle translation of Chinese silent films can be seen as both an expression of Chinese filmmakers' global ambitions and a form of Chinese cinematic modernity.

After completing my doctorate and publishing the monograph, I continued to expand this research. In 2015, I received funding from the Young Scientists Fund of the National Social Science Foundation of China for a project titled *A Study on the History of Chinese Films Translated into Foreign Languages (1905–2015)* (国家社科基金青年项目“中国电影外译史研究”). This project extended the scope beyond English to include multiple foreign languages. More recently, I have undertaken a major research project, *A General History of Film Translation in China (1896–2025)* (国家社科基金重大项目“中国电影翻译通史”), also funded by the National Social Science Foundation. This ongoing research adopts a broader and more

systematic approach, encompassing four key areas: (1) the history of translating foreign films into Chinese; (2) the history of translating Chinese films into foreign languages; (3) the history of translating films into China's ethnic minority languages; and (4) the history of barrier-free film translation in China, which refers to the translation of audiovisual content for audiences with visual and/or hearing impairments (e.g., through audio description and captioning).

Jia: You recently co-edited the book *Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation* with Professor Yves Gambier. Could you please tell us about the motivation behind this volume, its main content, and how it contributes to the translation and dissemination of Chinese films?

Jin: This book grew from the major project, *A General History of Film Translation in China*. At the time, I invited Professor Yves Gambier to co-lead one of its subprojects, *The History of the Foreign Translation of Chinese Films*. Professor Gambier is a highly respected expert in the international academic community. When we began working together, we already had the idea that a proper discussion of the translation of Chinese films should not only focus on translations carried out by Chinese institutions and translators. Equally important are the contributions of foreign institutions and translators who have worked to bring Chinese cinema to international audiences, yet this aspect has received limited academic attention. Recognizing this gap, we invited scholars worldwide, especially those specializing in Chinese cinema, to contribute to the project. The aim was to explore how Chinese films have been translated and disseminated across different countries and regions over the past hundred-plus years. Each scholar in the book focuses on different aspects: some look at historical and cultural backgrounds, others analyze policy orientations, some focus on the role of translators, and others examine film distribution.

Overall, this volume highlights the crucial role translation plays in the global circulation of Chinese cinema. It features contributions from sixteen scholars representing fourteen countries and regions, including Argentina, Chile, France, German-speaking countries, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico,

South Korea, Spain, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Uruguay. In many of these contexts, this is the first academic study to examine how Chinese cinema has been translated and received. It therefore offers the first truly global perspective on the international dissemination of Chinese films.

Jia: As the principal investigator of *The History of Chinese Films Translated into Foreign Languages* and chair researcher of *A General History of Film Translation in China*, you have extensive experience bringing Chinese films to international audiences. Could you give us a brief overview of the historical development of this field?

Jin: The translation of Chinese films for international audiences has a long and rich history that traces the entire development of Chinese cinema. As early as the 1920s, during the formative years of China's national film industry, film companies began adding bilingual subtitles in Chinese and English to their productions. These efforts aimed to reach international markets and share Chinese culture with global audiences. Translation not only attracted foreign viewers living in China but also helped Chinese films reach audiences across Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

During the Second Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s and 1940s, film translation played a key role in conveying to the international community the courage and resistance of the Chinese people, helping to shape positive global public opinion. With the advent of sound film technology, Chinese filmmakers began experimenting with dubbing. In 1947, *A Fake Phoenix* (假凤虚凰) caused a sensation in Shanghai and attracted the attention of British and American film distributors. Director Zuolin Huang (黄佐临) oversaw the translation and dubbing process, translating the Chinese dialogue into English and selecting more than twenty fluent English speakers with stage experience to provide the dubbed voices. The English version of the film achieved notable success abroad, encouraging other companies to see dubbing as a promising way to translate and promote Chinese films internationally.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, film translation became an

important tool of cultural diplomacy. At the 1955 Bandung Conference, which laid the groundwork for cultural and political exchange between China and newly independent Asian and African countries, Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩来), famously introduced the opera film *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯与祝英台) as “China’s *Romeo and Juliet*,” offering the world a glimpse into Chinese culture. With the help of audiovisual translation, Chinese cinema became a key window through which international audiences could learn about China.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong cinema developed a unique style of kung fu films, and dubbing played a crucial role in bringing these productions to international audiences. In 1973, the English-dubbed version of *The King Boxer* (天下第一拳) was released in the United States and became a box office success, opening the door for many more kung fu films to be distributed overseas. Foreign professionals based in Hong Kong dubbed thousands of local films into English, giving martial arts stars like Bruce Lee (李小龙) their English-speaking voices. Although these dubbed versions might seem rough by today’s standards, with mismatched lip-syncing and at times awkward translations, their impact was undeniable. Without English dubbing, kung fu films may never have gained such widespread international popularity.

Since the launch of China’s reform and opening-up policy in 1978, which aimed to foster economic development through international trade and cooperation, Chinese films have entered the global stage with growing confidence and increasing recognition from the international film community. From Dingyi Li (李定一)’s interpretation of *Red Sorghum* (红高粱) at the Berlin Film Festival to Sinologist Linda Jaivin’s subtitling of *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬), film translation has played a vital role in connecting Chinese cinema with audiences around the world.

In the twenty-first century, the global film industry has undergone profound transformations. Advances in digital technology have made subtitling and dubbing significantly more efficient, while the rise of the internet has dramatically expanded the reach of translated films.

Jia: Since China officially implemented the “Going Global” cultural strategy in 2000, the state’s attention to audiovisual translation has steadily increased. As Vice President and Secretary General of the Audiovisual Translation and Dissemination Council of the China Federation of Radio and Television Associations, could you talk a little about some governmental policies or initiatives supporting the translation and international dissemination of Chinese films, particularly in English?

Jin: The “Going Global” strategy has significantly promoted the international dissemination of Chinese cinema, particularly in English-speaking markets. In the early stages, Chinese film exports relied primarily on subtitled versions. Each year, the National Radio and Television Administration (国家广电总局) selected a number of outstanding films and commissioned the China Film Archive (中国电影资料馆) to produce subtitles in the six official UN languages, with English being one of the main targets.

Since 2011, several state-led initiatives, including the “China-Africa Film and Television Cooperation Project” (中非影视合作工程), the “Silk Road Film and Television Bridge Project” (丝绸之路影视桥工程), and the “Contemporary Works Translation Project” (当代作品翻译工程), have further expanded support for audiovisual translation. Although these projects encompass a variety of formats, not only films but also TV series and documentaries, and cover a wide range of languages, they have significantly contributed to translating Chinese films into foreign languages, often providing both subtitled and dubbed versions to accommodate diverse audience preferences.

These efforts are overseen and funded by the National Radio and Television Administration. As an industry association, the Audiovisual Translation and Dissemination Council provides third-party evaluations of translation quality and international reception and collaborates with professional audiovisual translation agencies to help develop industry standards for translating Chinese audiovisual content for international audiences.

Jia: You have translated and proofread numerous influential audiovisual works, including *Full River Red* (满江红) and *Avatar: The Way of Water*. Translating Chinese films for international audiences requires both fidelity to the original and sensitivity to the target audience's expectations, a process that is as creative as it is challenging. Could you please share some of your practical experiences, using some specific examples?

Jin: When translating the film's title *Man Jiang Hong* (满江红, *Full River Red*), which is also the name of a Chinese ci poetry tune (词牌名, a traditional Chinese poetic form with set rhythmic patterns), Director Yimou Zhang (张艺谋) and I considered several possible renderings. The final contenders were "Full River Red" and "The River All Red," the latter being the version used by Professor Yuanchong Xu (许渊冲) in his translation of Fei Yue (岳飞)'s poem titled "满江红." After much discussion, we settled on "Full River Red" as the official English title. The term "满江红" was originally a poetic tune title conveying a strong emotional tone and evocative imagery, rather than referring to any specific river. By contrast, the definite article "the" in "The River All Red" gives the impression of referring to a particular river, making it sound overly concrete. In the film, characters such as Hui Qin (秦桧) frequently refer to "Qiulin Ferry" (秋林渡), which implicitly suggests the existence of a river. However, the river itself never becomes central to the plot or a site of dramatic events. Therefore, using "The River All Red" might mislead audiences into expecting that the implied river will play a significant role, such as serving as the scene of a climactic bloodbath, which does not occur. "Full River Red" employs alliteration and preserves the poetic rhythm of the original title. Its alliterative phrasing enhances both euphony and memorability in English, while conveying metaphorical nuance and avoiding overly literal associations that might mislead international audiences.

Another example comes from a line in the film that references the classic poem attributed to Fei Yue (岳飞), 满江红. In the film, a character remarks that the poem contains "101 characters." However, translating this phrase literally as "101

characters" would sound unnatural in English, since English-language poetry is typically quantified by lines, stanzas, or syllables, not characters. To make the line more accessible to international viewers, we analyzed the poem's structure and determined that it could reasonably be rendered in twenty-two lines in English. Therefore, in the English subtitles, we translated the line as: "This poem has twenty-two lines." This adaptation preserves the original intent and cultural reference while aligning with English poetic conventions.

Jia: Martial arts films (武侠片) are a distinctive hallmark of Chinese cinema and culture, enjoying widespread recognition worldwide. While martial arts legend Bruce Lee's classics such as *The Way of the Dragon* (猛龙过江) and *Enter the Dragon* (龙争虎斗) helped popularize the genre internationally, more recent works like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龙) have taken an even more poetic and culturally rich approach. Given the deep roots of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics in such films, what do you think is the best way to translate them for international audiences?

Jin: Chinese martial arts films should preserve their cultural flavor in translation while remaining comprehensible to international audiences. The title 卧虎藏龙 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), for instance, alludes to the hidden heroes of the martial arts world, and the English translated title preserves that metaphor through a relatively literal (foreignizing) translation. This translation preserves the lyrical quality of the original phrase while rendering its metaphorical meaning accessible to global audiences.

The same philosophy applies to the translation of specific lines of dialogue. For instance, a martial arts master in the film introduces himself by saying, "Wo Nai Shi Hua Ying Wu Zong Fei Dao Cang (我乃是花影无踪飞刀藏, I am master of the Flying Machete in fleeting petals)." This line includes a stylized nickname and a reference to his signature technique. In translation, the emphasis can be placed on the core information, rendering it simply as "I am Flying Machete" while omitting "fleeting petals" to avoid confusion. This strategy ensures clarity

without overwhelming viewers with culturally dense references. The translation of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* effectively balances cultural authenticity and international intelligibility, and I consider it a model worth following.

Jia: With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, technologies based on AI are playing an increasingly prominent role in audiovisual translation. How do you perceive their impact on the process of film translation?

Jin: Indeed, I have noticed that some fan subtitling groups, especially those on video-sharing platforms like *Bilibili*, have already begun attempting to use fully AI-generated subtitles. However, these subtitles often fall short in accuracy and naturalness in practice. AI applications have also emerged in dubbing but are mostly limited to short video content for now. In the commercial film industry, whether in subtitling or dubbing, the adoption of AI remains minimal. This is mainly because, as paying customers, cinema audiences tend to have limited tolerance for subpar content. As a result, film distributors are often reluctant to compromise the viewing experience in order to reduce translation expenses, particularly for theatrical release, especially considering that such costs typically constitute only a small fraction of the overall film budget. AI still holds great potential as a support tool for translators. Even if AI-generated subtitling or dubbing is unsuitable for theatrical release, it can still serve as a useful reference during translation, providing inspiration or helping us find more idiomatic expressions. In short, AI is still far from being able to take the lead in complex audiovisual translation tasks. Still, it is increasingly proving useful as a complementary tool, supporting translators in various workflow stages and improving efficiency.

Jia: What suggestions would you give those starting or interested in a career in film translation?

Jin: First, it is essential to develop strong language skills alongside a deep understanding of cultural

contexts and cross-cultural awareness. Second, familiarize yourself with industry standards and relevant translation scholarship. Third, practical experience—through internships, freelance projects, or participation in fansubbing and fandubbing communities—is crucial for building a strong portfolio. Finally, proactive networking, whether through professional organizations, translation conferences, or online forums, can significantly enhance career development.

Jia: One last question: What are your expectations for the future of film translation?

Jin: In the age of AI, I hope film translation will continue to elevate human creativity and foster deeper mutual understanding. AI will enable films from different countries to be translated into multiple languages and reach global audiences at unprecedented speed and scale. As cinematic storytelling continues to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, it holds the potential to cultivate even greater empathy, connection, and shared appreciation across humanity.

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