

# Cinematic Multilingualism in China and its Subtitling

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## Abstract

After several decades of promoting a homogenous language in the People's Republic of China (China), the inclusion of local languages other than Putonghua (standard modern Chinese) in films in recent years has led to a heated debate on language policy in the country. It is against this background that the paper seeks to discuss the current situation in China as well as explore factors behind the current development of multilingual films in the country, indicating that there is a grassroots appeal for the protection of language and cultural diversity. By conducting a case study on *The Flowers of War* (Yimou Zhang, 2011), a China-made polyglot film, this paper investigates the role of subtitling in multilingual films and its potential for promoting a multilingual multicultural society.

**Keywords:** Yimou Zhang; *The Flowers of War*; multilingualism; subtitling, Chinese language policy.

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## Resum. *La subtitulació del multilingüisme a la Xina*

Després que la República Popular de la Xina hagi promogut diverses vegades una llengua homogènia, la inclusió a films dels darrers anys de llenguatges locals altres que el Putonghua, el xinès estàndard modern, ha obert un debat apassionat sobre la política lingüística del país. És a partir d'aquest rerefons que l'article busca analitzar la situació xinesa actual i explorar els factors que han afavorit l'aparició d'aquestes pel·lícules multilingües, que indiquen una demanda local de protegir el llenguatge i la diversitat cultural. L'article investiga el paper de la subtitulació en pel·lícules multilingües i el potencial que té de promoure una societat multilingüe i multicultural mitjançant l'estudi d'una pel·lícula poliglota de Zhang Yimou, *The Flowers of War* (2011).

**Paraules clau:** Zhang Yimou; *The Flowers of War*; multilingüisme; subtitulació; política lingüística; Xina.

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## Summary

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|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Introduction  | 4. Conclusion            |
| 2. The Development of Multilingual<br>Films in China       | Bibliographic references |
| 3. Case Study: Promoting<br>Multilingualism via Subtitling |                          |

### 1. Introduction

Multilingual films refer to «films involving more than one “natural” language in their dialogue and narration» (Bréan & Cornu 2012), which have increasingly appeared in cinemas around the world. Multilingual films in China were developed only in recent years and Ge (2012) believes that this is partly due to the language policy and planning of the Chinese government to promote Putonghua as the standard Chinese language nation-wide. Although Putonghua is widely known internationally as the official language of China, there is less awareness that China is a multilingual country with fifty-six ethnic groups speaking one hundred and twenty-nine languages (Sun, Hu, & Huang 2007). Since 1956, the Chinese Government has pursued a policy of promoting the standard modern Chinese and this was further entrenched in 2001 after being enshrined in legislation for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of such a policy, the first Film in dialect was not produced until 1963, and this led to a decline in such productions for several decades (Ge 2012). Nevertheless, an increasing number of films with dialects and languages other than that of Putonghua have been produced in recent years, and these have received positive feedback from viewers for their vivid and natural depiction of life at grassroots level. Some fans also dub foreign movies into their own dialects or local languages and share them on Internet. Meanwhile, software and online dictionaries have also been produced to promote other dialects and local languages. This phenomenon has provoked a wide-ranging discussion and debate in the Chinese media and this has been addressed as ‘dialect fever’ (Li 2010).

Attention has been drawn to the research of multilingual film from various academic disciplines. Bréan & Cornu (2012) conclude that multilingualism in films was investigated mainly from three major aspects: «as a narrative and aesthetic element of a film, including cultural identity issues; from a reception point of view, especially with monolingual audiences; and as a specific problem for translators who devise various strategies to solve it». Meylaerts (2006: 3) believes that Translation Studies is the best method apart from other disciplines to explore this domain, which «help to address questions of nationhood, of socio-political, linguistic and cultural power struggles in multilingual societies from a functional,

1. Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (Order of the President No. 37). <[http://english.gov.cn/laws/2005-09/19/content\\_64906.htm](http://english.gov.cn/laws/2005-09/19/content_64906.htm)> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

descriptive angle». Indeed, as Dwyer (2005: 295) indicates, «cinema bears a fascinating relationship to translation, both real and figurative». Although several scholars in Translation Studies have contributed substantial research on this topic (Bartoll 2006; Bleichenbacher 2008; Bréan & Cornu 2012; Dwyer 2005; Kruger, Kruger, & Verhoef 2007; Meylaerts 2006; Şerban 2012), further study is still required, especially on issues pertaining to the situation in China. This article will seek to fill this gap by firstly reflecting on the language-political situation of the country and exploring reasons behind the recent development of multilingual films in China, so as to indicate a grassroots advocacy for the protection of language and cultural diversity in the country. It will then conduct a case study on *The Flowers of War* (Yimou Zhang 2011), a recent China-made polyglot film, to investigate the role of subtitling in polyglot films and its potential for the promotion of a multilingual and multicultural society.

## 2. The Development of Multilingual Films in China

This section will start by introducing the general language situation in China before reflecting on China's language policy, with a special focus on the usage of non-Putonghua languages in the media. It will then discuss the development of multilingual films and their implications against the social and political background of the country.

### 2.1. China's Language Policy: Putonghua Promotion

China is a multilingual and multi-ethnic country where the language situation is complex and diversified. The *Language Atlas of China* (中国语言地图集) (Wurm, Li, Baumann, & Lee 1987) indicates that there are ten Sinitic languages, namely Putonghua, Jin, Wu, Hui, Gan, Xiang, Min, Hakka, Yue and Ping. Meanwhile, according to the latest information provided on the official website of the central government of China,<sup>2</sup> Hanyu (汉语) [Han language] is the common language of the ethnic group Han, which is the largest ethnic group in China and makes up 91.51% of the general population. The modern Hanyu contains Putonghua, the standard and official language of China, and several dialects. The dialects are usually categorized into seven dialect systems: Northern dialect, Wu dialect, Xiang dialect, Gan dialect, Hakka dialect, Cantonese, and Hokkien. In addition, within each dialect system, there are several local variations. With the exception of Han, the population of the fifty-five minority groups represents 8.49% of the overall population. Among this group, Hui and Man ethnic groups have fully switched from their own languages into Hanyu. Whereas, the remaining fifty-three minority groups each have their own languages. Linguistic scholars conclude that there are one hundred and twenty-nine languages currently in

2. For more information, see the official website of the Centre People's Government of People's Republic of China. <[http://www.gov.cn/test/2011-10/31/content\\_1982575.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2011-10/31/content_1982575.htm)> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

use in China (Sun et al. 2007). These languages belong to five language families, namely Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic, and Indo-European. Furthermore, the writing systems of these languages include ideo-phonographic, syllabic, and alphabetic writing.

This diversity has created a number of difficulties for the government, particularly with respect to its language policies. Despite an issue of modern concern, language planning has a history in China that can be traced back for over 2000 years. The relationship between language and the state has been linked to consolidate state power since, at least, 221 BC when the Qin Emperor standardized the Chinese script. China has followed this legacy of tradition and modernization in both theory and practice of language planning, aiming to strengthen its control over the country and establish a strong China (Zhou & Ros 2004: 2-3). One of the thorny issues lies in the relationship of Putonghua with dialects and other languages. Promoting Putonghua and protecting local dialects and languages are both considered fundamental, as regulated in the Constitution of China:<sup>3</sup> Article 4 states that «All nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs». Additionally, article 19 declares that «the State promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua». However, in practice, the two policies have been seemingly in conflict with each other.

Putonghua was formally adopted as the common speech for the whole nation in 1956, which is officially defined «to have Beijing speech as its standard pronunciation» and «modern Chinese literary classics written in vernacular Chinese as its grammatical norm» (China 1996: 12). In the same year, the State Council called to promote Putonghua in *The Instruction on Promoting Putonghua* (国务院关于推广普通话的指示),<sup>4</sup> which, according to, Putonghua should be taught in primary and middle schools national-wide. Radios in dialect regions should have Putonghua programs to help local citizens hear and speak Putonghua. Announcers, film actors, professional drama actors and singers must receive Putonghua training. According to Guo (2004: 46-47), the 1950s language policy indicated the official view that Chinese dialects are to be ultimately replaced by Putonghua. This view persisted until the 1980s. However, the language policy was reflected in the late 1980s when there was a dialect revival in public use of language. Scholars and policy-makers once reached a consensus on the diversity of language use and the coexistence of Putonghua and dialects. In 1999, the State Council authorized a study on the situation of languages usage in China, which was organized and conducted by the State Language Commission. According to the result,<sup>5</sup> in 1999, excluding Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, only 53.06% of the people in China can speak Putonghua. Nevertheless, 86.38% of Chinese can com-

3. Full text of Constitution of the People's Republic of China can be found at <[http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content\\_1372963.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372963.htm)> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

4. Full text of the Circular can be found at <[http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-08/02/content\\_19132.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-08/02/content_19132.htm)> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

5. *Sina News* article «The Survey on the Language Usage in China, 53% of the Population Can Speak Putonghua» (中国语言文字使用调查 能用普通话人口比例53%). <<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2004-12-26/17204633373s.shtml>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

municate in Hanyu dialects. Moreover, 5.46% of people can use languages of minority ethnic groups. Seen from the statistics of this research, almost half of the whole population cannot speak Putonghua or Putonghua at an advanced level. It appears that this result is not satisfactory to the central government and may have lead to a reconsideration of its language planning.

In 2000, *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* was adopted at the 18th Meeting of Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress and came into force on January 1, 2001. Article one of this law states that it is «enacted in accordance with the Constitution for the purpose of promoting the normalization and standardization of the standard spoken and written Chinese language and its sound development, making it play a better role in public activities, and promoting economic and cultural exchange among all the Chinese nationalities and regions» (see footnote one). With regard to the media, article 14 regulates that the standard spoken and written Chinese language shall be used as the basic spoken and written language for broadcasting, films and TV programs. For anyone who violates this law, as article 27 states that «shall be ordered by the relevant administrative departments to put it right within a time limit and be given a disciplinary warning». It can be seen that the central government aimed to reinforce the policy of promoting Putonghua and perform a more stringent control over the usage of languages in media. It may be due to such legalization, according to the result of a sample survey in Hebei, Jiangsu and Guangxi provinces conducted by the language application institute in 2010. According to the sample study, 72.2%, 70.7% and 80.44% of people in these three provinces have mastered Putonghua. The results of this survey show that the percentage of Putonghua speakers has increased in the last 10 years. The campaign of promoting Putonghua seems to have incurred substantial success, whereas, the maintenance and development of minority languages has received decreased support. The government is considered to have adopted a «(social) Darwinist attitude - allowing nature to run its own course» (Zhou & Ross 2004: 16) with regards to the future of non-Putonghua languages.

## 2.2. Dialect Protection and the Development of Multilingual Films

According to Yu (2008: 40), the first film in dialect and the first sound film in China was *The White-Golden Dragon* (白金龙) (*Tianyi Entertainment*, 1933), which was made in Cantonese and produced in Hong Kong. In mainland China, the first film containing dialects, claimed by Ge (2012: 37), is *Zhua Zhuangding* (抓壮丁) (*August First Film Studio*, 1963), which contains Sichuan dialect. However, multilingual films in China entered a quiet period for a few decades, which, as Ge (*ibid.*) believes, is due to the language policy of exclusively promoting Putonghua implemented by the central government. Nevertheless, dialects have begun to appear again in media since the late 1990s and have become increasingly popular with viewers.

In 2004, a channel of the Hangzhou TV station started a program broadcasting news in local dialect. Traditionally, news is always broadcasted in Putong-

hua, since it has conventionally been seen as a serious matter, following the style of CCTV (China Central Television) News. This news program was well received by local audiences, which led to an exceptionally high audience rating. It inspired other local TV stations and broadcasting news networks in dialects soon became a trend. In the opinion of Yu (2008: 41), this phenomenon indicates that the previously marginalized dialect programs have entered through the door of mainstream media. Meanwhile, many foreign films and TV programs are translated and dubbed into local dialects, the DVDs of which are available in the market. The US animated cartoon *Tom and Jerry* (Time Warner, 1940~2005) has several dubbing versions, in more than six different dialects. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of multilingual films and TV programs among the general public, SARFT (The State Administration of Radio Film and Television) issued the *Circular of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Strengthening the Administration of Broadcasting Translated Overseas Radio and Television Programs* (广电总局关于加强译制境外广播电视节目播出管理的通知)<sup>6</sup> in 2004, which states that overseas radio and television programs that are translated into local dialects shall not be broadcast by radio and TV broadcasting institutes on all levels. The ones that are broadcasting now shall be stopped immediately. Ironically, article 16 of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* states that local dialect can be used «where they are needed in traditional operas, films and TV programs and other forms of art» (see footnote one). What is more, in 2005, SARFT issued the *Circular of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Reiterating TV Plays Using Standard Language* (广电总局关于进一步重申电视剧使用规范语言的通知). The circulation regulates that:

- 1) The language in TV play (except local traditional Chinese opera play) shall mainly use Putonghua. In general situations, dialects and non-standard Chinese shall not be used.
- 2) Serious TV play based on themes of revolution and history, Children's TV play, and special advertising or educational TV play should all use Putonghua.
- 3) Leaders in TV play shall speak Putonghua (author's translation).

Despite the circular, many local TV stations still insist on reserving space for local languages in their TV programs. In 2009, SARTT issued *The Circular on Exercising Strictly Control over the Usage of Dialects in TV Play* (广电总局办公厅关于严格控制电视剧使用方言的通知)<sup>7</sup> to strengthen the abovementioned circulation in 2005. The circulation also urges all provincial broadcasters, film and TV administrative departments to exercise strict censorship on the completed TV plays. TV plays that should not use dialect, massively used dialect or over-used dialect shall be corrected. The ones that are not corrected shall not be aired.

6. Full text of the Circular can be found at <<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2004/10/26/20070919143136380760.html>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

7. Full text of the Circular can be found at <<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2009/07/20/20090720153447400616.html>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

Nevertheless, the popularity of multilingual films and TV drama among the general public continued to increase.

These circulars have raised a new wave of appeals for protecting local dialects. The risk of losing dialect and local languages under the national-wide encouragement for learning and speaking Putonghua has long been a concern of several linguists. Li Mingyu (2007), director of *Department of Language Planning and Administration, the Ministry of Education*, also pointed out that several local languages and dialects are in danger and must be protected. Qian Nairong, vice director of *Shanghai Language and Literature Society* and professor of the literature department at *Shanghai University*, considers the ban on dialects in TV and radio endangers the future development of dialects and has negative influence on cultural diversity in China (Qian 2005: 8). He has great concerns on the future of Shanghai dialects, since the survey conducted by the *Education Commission of Shanghai* indicates that only 45% of local families speak Shanghai dialects and many young people cannot speak the local language. He calls for a comfortable environment for Shanghai locals to speak their mother tongue and a multilingual media.<sup>8</sup> Ma (2008: 32-33) also considers that a broader space should be reserved for dialects and promoting Putonghua should not interfere with using dialects or demolish dialects. As well, Zhang (2006) considers the circulars from SARFT strangle dialects which are cultural heritages of each Chinese and are valuable for academic research, such as cultural anthropology. He appeals for legalization on protecting local languages and culture. In addition, the general public also has heated discussion on this topic on several online forums and personal blogs. Software and online dictionaries have also been produced to promote and reserve dialects and local languages, such as *dictionary of Hanyu dialects with pronunciation* (汉语方言发音字典).<sup>9</sup> In 2012, China Youth Daily conducted an online survey<sup>10</sup> on the usage of dialects in daily life and methods of protecting local languages. According to the results, 57.2% of people believe that making young people aware of the meaning and value of speaking dialect is the most important part of protecting dialects. Likewise 25.7% of the participants believe producing more films and TV programs that contain dialects is a way to protect local languages, which is almost as important as open dialect classes in school (26.1%). Ding Chongming, professor of Chinese culture studies in *Beijing Normal University*, also calls for more attention on dialects from the media to create an environment for children to learn dialects.

At the same time as the increasing grassroots approach for protecting local languages and culture, films containing dialects blossomed in the last few years,

8. Li, Y. (2011). 钱乃荣：应给上海人一个宽松说母语的环境 (Qian Nairong: Shanghai People Should be Given a Comfortable Environment to Speak Their Mother Tongue), *东方早报* (*Dongfang daily*). <<http://www.dfdaily.com/html/171/2011/11/9/693868.shtml>> (last visited on April 30, 2013)
9. The dictionary is available online at <<http://cn.voicedic.com>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).
10. See *China News* article «Research Shows that Less and Less Young People Can Speak Dialects. Linguists Call for the Protection of Dialects» (调查称会说方言年轻人越来越少 学者吁保护方言) <[http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2012/03-22/3762906\\_2.shtml](http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2012/03-22/3762906_2.shtml)> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

especially after the success of *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头) (Warner China Film HG Corporation, 2006), a multilingual film, fixing Chongqing dialect, Qingdao dialect, Tangshan dialect, Henan dialect and Cantonese. The film was a blockbuster, the box office return of which reached RMB 23.5 million. Multilingualism in this film has been widely considered as one of the main reasons for its success. It also started a «dialect film fever» (Li 2010), since substantial amount of polyglot films were produced in a short period afterwards. Ge (2012: 37) believes that dialects are used in movies in recent years in China mainly due to the following considerations: dialects can bring realistic effects in depicting grassroots characters and it conveys humour. In addition, Jiang (2006: 108) believes that the rise of multilingualism in films reflects people's demand for culture diversity and a multilingual society. She considers film an effective medium for protecting dialects and local culture.

As seen from the history and development of multilingual films in China, the use of dialects in films certainly has aesthetic considerations. Additionally, it reveals the conflict of enforcing a homogenous national language and protecting local language and culture. The recent growth of multilingual films under the stringent language policies from the government reflects a grassroots appeal for a multilingual multicultural society. With regard to a multilingual environment, translation is in a crucial position to bridge communication of different languages and enhance mutual understanding of various cultures. Translation also performs an important role in maintaining and promoting multilingualism and culture diversity. The following section will examine whether the translation of polyglot films, with a focus on subtitling in particular, can reflect and promote multilingualism in films by conducting a case study.

### 3. Case Study: Promoting Multilingualism via Subtitling

In multilingual films, translation overlaps with film-making (Bréan & Cornu 2012) and plays a crucial part in storytelling. The translation of multilingual films, as Şerban (2012: 43) mentioned, is usually in two forms: subtitling and interpreting. Subtitling for multilingual films, from the observation of Bartoll (2006: 5), include four main types: 1) not to indicate the usage of a different language; 2) to indicate a different language by not translating it; 3) to indicate a different language by transcribing it; 4) to translate different languages. To further explore the involvement of translation in multilingual films, this case study will analyse the subtitling in the film of *The Flowers of War* 金陵十三钗 (Yimou Zhang, 2011) and explore the potentials of subtitles in promoting multilingualism in China.

#### 3.1. About The Flowers of War

*The Flowers of War* is a historical war film drama, based on the novel *13 Flowers of Nanjing* by Geling Yan, a Chinese-American author and directed by Yimou Zhang, one of the internationally recognized Chinese film directors. The film was selected as the Chinese entry for the best foreign language film at the 84th Academy

Awards. Although it did not make the final shortlist for Oscar, it has gained a substantial global audience.

The background of this film is set in the Sino-Japanese war in December 1937. The Japanese Imperial Army carried out brutal killings in Nanjing, the capital city at that time, which is known as the Nanjing Massacre. In the film, a group of schoolgirls flee to a Roman Catholic Cathedral under the cover of some Chinese soldiers, where they met John Miller, an American mortician, who is commissioned to bury the head priest, and the adopted son of the priest. They were later joined by a group of prostitutes who hide in the cellar. Miller tried to keep everybody safe by pretending to be a priest. However, Japanese soldiers found and harassed the schoolgirls hiding there. A Japanese Colonel promised to protect the convent by placing guards outside the gate but requested the schoolgirls to sing a choral at the Japanese Army's victory celebration. The schoolgirls refused to do that and attempted to commit suicide by jumping off the cathedral tower. The prostitutes and the adopted son of the priest then decided to protect the girls and went to the Japanese party by taking their place under makeup. Miller fixed a truck with the help of father of a girl, who worked as a translator for the Japanese and eventually drove away from Nanjing with the schoolgirls.

Multilingualism in film is mainly related to the realistic depiction of situations and aims to preserve authenticity (O'Sullivan 2011; Şerban 2012). *The Flowers of War* involves three nationalities (Chinese, American, and Japanese) and five languages (English, Japanese, Putonghua, Nanjing dialect, and a small amount of Shanghai dialect). According to Yimou Zhang,<sup>11</sup> director of the film, the usage of several languages, especially the Nanjing dialect, is for the consideration of conveying local culture. In addition, Zhang<sup>12</sup> considers that the Nanjing dialect was used artistically in the movie, which enhances the realistic description of characters and the solemn and stirring story line. Ge (2012: 37) also believes that the usage of Nanjing dialect brought the cruelty of war in a more vivid and realistic way. In addition, Multilingualism also serves as a narrative device (Bréan & Cornu 2012). In this film, the language(s) that each character can speak also reveals unspoken information about the social and educational background of the character and help to portrait their characteristics; it may also consciously or unconsciously signify marginalisation or discrimination of certain ethnic or social group, as addressed and discussed by Bleichenbacher (2008). In this film, John Miller speaks naturally American English. He uses some American expressions, such as «a cup of joe». The schoolgirls and the priest's adopted son speak Nanjing dialect, since they were local, and English, as informed in the film that they received Western education in schools sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. Mo Yu, one of the prostitutes, also speaks English, which surprised other

11. See *Sina News* article «Yimou Zhang talks about *The Flowers of War*» (张艺谋谈《金陵十三钗》). <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2011-12-13/09413506124.shtml>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

12. Zhang, C. (2011). 评：南京话为《十三钗》加分 用方言重在艺术需要 (Comments: Nanjing Dialect Adds Value to *The Flowers of War*). «The Emphasis of Dialect Usage is an Artistic Requirement», *中国新闻网* (*China News*). <<http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2011/12-29/3570127.shtml>> (last visited on April 30, 2013).

prostitutes and arouses audience's curiosity, as prostitutes at that time were barely educated with little opportunity to learn English. The languages that she can speak add mystery to the female protagonist and embed a plot for her social background that is revealed later. The other prostitutes speak only Nanjing dialect. However, it is indicated that they understand Putonghua, since they replied to a Chinese soldier who speaks Putonghua in a few conversations. The arrangement for all Chinese soldiers to speak Putonghua, instead of dialect is rather interesting. In reality, they may also be from Nanjing area or from many other different regions in China. Nonetheless, they all speak very standard Putonghua with no accent of any dialect. This may be due to the fact that they represent the authority and are portrayed as heroes. They therefore need to speak Putonghua, in the same way, as regulated in the aforementioned circular issued by SARFT, that «leaders in TV play shall speak Putonghua». The Japanese Colonel, who is depicted also as a victim of the war, speaks both Japanese and English; whereas, other Japanese soldiers who speak Japanese only were portrayed as cold killers and brutal rappers. The interpreter, who was the father of one of the schoolgirls, speaks English, Japanese, and Shanghai dialect. Some people consider him a traitor, since he worked for the Japanese, although it was the only way for him to save his daughter. On internet forums, several discussions have been raised as to question why the negative role has to speak Shanghai dialect in particular and many Shanghai locals consider it discriminative against Shanghai people. It can be seen that multilingualism can also have indications on the depiction of characters and other unspoken meanings.

The translation of this film is rather complicated, since it is not only interlingual (between Putonghua and English, Japanese to Putonghua and to English) but also intralingual (between Putonghua and local dialects: Nanjing dialect and Shanghai dialect). To experience and enjoy such a feast of languages, translation is needed more than usual by the audience. As pointed out by Bréan & Cornu, the diversity of «multilingual» films calls for «equally diverse translation strategies ranging from total respect of multilingualism to imposed monolingualism» (Bréan & Cornu 2012). The following section will therefore explore whether the translation of the film can effectively bring Chinese and the greater global audience the experience of the multilingual environment which the director aims to depict and convey functions of multilingualism in film-making.

### 3.2. *Subtitling for the Domestic Audience*

China is traditionally a dubbing country, where films with foreign languages are translated and dubbed into Putonghua before showing in the cinema. As aforementioned, dubbing into local languages or dialects is banned by the government. In multilingual films, foreign actors usually either speak fluent Putonghua themselves or have their voice dubbed. Films and TV programs that contains dialects usually provides interlingual subtitles. In the case of *The Flowers of War* (Yimou Zhang 2011), instead of dubbing all the non-Putonghua dialogues like most of the imported films, the original soundtrack was kept and Putonghua subtitles were

provided for all dialogues in the film, including the ones in Putonghua itself. This allows the Chinese audience to experience the multilingual surroundings in the film in a much more realistic way. It might be under the influence of fan-subbing, the online version launched by Letv (乐视网),<sup>13</sup> which also provides paralleled English/Putonghua bilingual subtitles, and this can be seen in the example below. Japanese is also translated into English and Putonghua. However, it is not transcribed in the subtitles.



Nanjing and Shanghai dialects in this film are translated and subtitled into Putonghua. However, these two dialects were not distinguished from each other and from Putonghua in subtitles in any way. The Majority of Chinese audience probably know that the film contains a substantial amount of Nanjing dialect, since it was widely promoted as a selling point in the marketing campaign. However, the Shanghai dialect included in the film might not be noticed or distinguished by the audience from other regions in China. Some viewers posted questions online to ask which dialect the father of the schoolgirl spoke. The subtitling methods of «translation with explicit attribution», discussed by Szarkowska, Zbikowska and Krejtz (Szarkowska, Żbikowska, & Krejtz 2013) in subtitling multilingual film for deaf and hard of hearing, can perhaps help in this situation. It would be clearer to the audience when the switching of dialects is marked in subtitles, such as an indication in brackets at the beginning or the end of the subtitles.

Nanjing dialect is a variation of Putonghua, which belongs to Jianghuai Mandarin (江淮官话). It is different from standard Putonghua in terms of its tone and pronunciation. For example, in the Nanjing dialect, /n/ is pronounced as /l/. The grammar of Nanjing dialect is similar to Putonghua. However, there are some unique vocabulary and phrases in the Nanjing dialect which may not be under-

13. The film can be watched online at <<http://www.letv.com/ptv/pplay/45816.html>> (last visited on April 30, 2013)

stood by people from other regions. By comparing the original dialogue in Nanjing dialect and its translation in Putonghua, it may be seen that unique features of dialect are lost in the subtitles. This could be prevented and more of the original dialect could be preserved, as shown in the following examples:

Example One:

Nanjing Dialect: 不要以为就你们会说洋文，啊是滴啊？

buyao yiwei jiu nimen hui shuo yangwen, a shi di a?

Back translation: (You) should not think that only you can speak a foreign language, is that right?

Putonghua: 不要以为就你们会说洋文

buyao yiwei jiu nimen hui shuo yangwen

Back translation: (You) should not think that only you can speak a foreign language

«A shi di a (啊是滴啊)» is one of the typical sayings in Nanjing dialect, which equals to «*dui ma (对吗)?*» (is that right?) in Putonghua and is usually used to stress what has been said before. «A shi di a (啊是滴啊)» appeared many times in the film. However, all of them were omitted as shown in this example, which may be considered not so important for the storyline. Nonetheless, it would certainly add some zest of Nanjing dialect if it was kept in the subtitle but marked in italics to indicate it is from the dialect.

Example Two:

Nanjing Dialect: 他一大早就颠得唻 ta yidazao jiu diandelai

Back translation: He ran away in a hurry very early this morning.

Putonghua: 他一大早就跑掉了 ta yidazao jiu paodiaole.

Back translation: He ran off very early this morning.

In example two, the modal particle «唻 lai» was transferred into «了 le» in Putonghua. However, it would not affect the meaning of this sentence by keeping it, which again may give the audience some flavour of the dialect. In addition, the word «颠 dian» was translated into «跑 pao» (run). However, the meaning of «颠 dian» in Nanjing dialect indicates «flee» or «run off in a hurry», which implies more than merely «run». On the other hand, «颠 dian» and other special words in dialect, when the space is allowed, could be kept but in italics with a short explanation in brackets, like 他一大早就颠得唻(跑了)。

Inserting unique vocabularies from dialects with explanations into the subtitles may work for local languages that are in general close to Putonghua, like Nanjing dialect. For dialects that have greater dissimilarities from Putonghua, such as Cantonese, it may lead to complications. However, paralleled bilingual subtitles can be an effective solution. Initially practised by fan-subtitlers for the purpose of learning foreign languages, many global TV drama online are now subtitled in this way. Young people who watch a lot of foreign TV online are familiar and comfortable with paralleled bilingual subtitles. By transcribing dialects, unique features and usages in dialects are visualized and more visible to

audience from all regions, which not only help to protect local languages and culture, but also enhance mutual understanding of people from different regions. Pilot research with regard to subtitling as a method to promote Multilingualism has been conducted in South Africa, which indicates that intralingual subtitles can be an effective strategy for the encouragement of multilingualism (Kruger et al. 2007). The same can also be applied to the situation in China and could have potentially fruitful outcomes.

### 3.3. *Subtitling for the Global Audience*

The subtitles in the DVD version<sup>14</sup> unfortunately do not specify the multilingual features of this film. On the cover of the DVD, it writes «Language: Chinese/English» and the subtitles are in English. In the film, all the non-English dialogues are subtitled into English with no indication of different languages. The audience of non-Chinese speakers may or may not be able to distinguish the difference between Putonghua, Nanjing dialect and Shanghai dialect or even between Chinese languages and the Japanese. However, they are not informed in any way from the subtitles that there are several languages in the film, although several methods, such as using italics, different colours, or an explanation in brackets, are optional to highlight multilingualism in this film. This could be for the consideration of costs and norms in the industrial practice of DVD subtitling. Nonetheless, an opportunity to demonstrate the multilingual multicultural characteristics of Chinese society to the world-wide audience in this case is lost.

## 4. Conclusion

The rapid development of multilingual films in China acting with a framework of the general language policy of promoting Putonghua as the national language has led to a grassroots appeal for protecting local languages and culture in China. Moreover, by conducting a case study of a polyglot film, it may be argued that the present subtitling strategies in China can be improved to make multilingual features more visible to the audience. When subtitling dialects that have smaller variations to Putonghua, it is suggested not to translate unique vocabularies from the other dialects but to keep them in the subtitles with explanations. In case of translating dialects that have greater dissimilarities to Putonghua, bilingual parallel subtitling may be an effective method to preserve the authenticity of different languages. The features of multilingualism in films should be manifested not only from the audial perspective but also in a visual way.

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