

Echoes Across Cultures: Tracing the Evolution and Prospects of Translating Chinese Minority-themed Films into English

Biyu Wu¹ and Jing Hua^{2,*}

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the English translation challenges associated with Chinese minority-themed films. The complexities of translating Chinese minority-themed films into English are examined with their historical context, significance, and translation obstacles. By addressing these challenges, the study aims to enhance cross-cultural communication in cinema and promote global cultural exchange. Through a detailed analysis of translation issues, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps in film translation.

Keywords: Chinese minority-themed films, cultural exchange, English translation, international dissemination.

Submitted: December 22, 2024

Published: March 15, 2025

 10.24018/ejlang.2025.4.2.144

¹Professor of College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China.

²Associate Professor of School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, China.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: huajing0909@163.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The English translation of Chinese minority-themed films plays a crucial role in the history of the Chinese film industry, serving various functions such as political, entertainment, and economic. Since 1949, it has gone through three distinct phases, with a notable increase in translated films following China's accession to the World Trade Organization. Despite this growth, numerous technical and functional challenges remain unresolved, hindering the films' effectiveness in the English-speaking world. Although notable advancements have been made in the minority-themed films, limited scholarly attention has been given to its English translation issues. By compiling data from 570 Chinese minority-themed films spanning the period from 1933 to 2021, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the developmental trajectory and significance of this genre. Despite the significant growth in both the quantity and diversity of Chinese minority-themed films in this period, there has been insufficient focus on their English translation challenges. Therefore, this paper seeks to review the developmental history of Chinese minority-themed films and explore their roles and functions at different stages, shedding light on the background and relevance of the English translation issues.

Chinese minority-themed filmmaking began in 1933, with only three films produced before 1949¹. The establishment of the People's Republic of China ushered in a period of prosperity for minority-themed films, especially with a gradual increase in production from the 1950s to the 1970s. Following the reform and opening-up policy, minority-themed filmmaking reached its peak, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the turn of the century, this field has experienced even greater prosperity, marked by a surge in production.

Chinese minority-themed films, spanning a diverse range of ethnicities, prominently feature the cultural richness and diversity of China's ethnic groups. Among them, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uyghur films are particularly prolific, characterized by rich artistic expression and unique ethnic styles. These films have garnered significant acclaim both domestically and internationally, reflecting their contribution to the cinematic landscape and their portrayal of cultural traditions and societal themes, which deepen understanding and appreciation of China's diverse ethnic heritage.

¹The film *Hua Mulan Joins the Army*, produced in 1939, involves the Xianbei ethnic group, which no longer exists, and therefore was not included.



In recent years, research on Chinese minority-themed films has increasingly explored various aspects, including development mechanisms, social functions, and ethnic cultures (Hu, 2013a, 2013b; Rao, 2011), gradually forming a comprehensive system. As highlighted by Rao (2015), minority-themed films, particularly those in native languages, have become essential cultural resources for representing the national image. They express cultural aspirations and play a crucial role in depicting the spirit, temperament, and culture of minority ethnicity. Moreover, in the context of China's cultural globalization and emphasis on cultural confidence, these films have the potential to lead China's film industry in international outreach efforts.

However, despite their significance, there is a notable absence of systematic research on the English translation of Chinese minority-themed films. This deficiency has, to a certain extent, hindered these films from fulfilling their intended functions and roles. In the current era of China's cultural expansion and emphasis on cultural confidence, coupled with English being the world's most widely used international language, the lack of systematic research on the English translation of Chinese minority-themed films is a notable gap. Addressing this gap is essential to unlock the full potential of these films in representing China's cultural diversity and fostering international cultural exchanges.

1.1. History of Chinese Minority-Themed Films

Prior to 1949, there were only three Chinese narrative films that showcased images of minority ethnic groups, namely *Yao Shan Yan Shi* (Romance on the Huashan Mountains—1933), *Sai Shang Feng Yun* (Storm on the Border—1940), and *Hua Lian Gang* (The Hualian Port—1948), portraying the Yao, Mongolian, and Gaoshan ethnic groups, respectively (Rao, 2011).

From 1933 to 2021, approximately 570 Chinese minority-themed films have been produced. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, minority-themed films have received substantial support from the state. During the planned economy era², these films were produced, purchased, and distributed by the government. Even after the transition to a market economy, the state continued to view these films as public welfare and cultural preservation projects. Policies such as subsidies, support funds, film festivals, awards, tribute films, and preferential acquisition by television channels have been implemented to maintain their unique ecosystem (Gu, 2015, p. 62).

Shi and Huang (2019) divided the development of minority-themed films in New China into four stages: the Rise stage (1949–1979), the Revival stage (1980–1991), the Exploration stage (1992–2000), and the Transformation stage (2001–2019). At different stages, minority-themed films have exhibited different characteristics, carried different functions, and played different roles.

1.1.1. Stage One: Rise (1949–1979)

During the “Seventeen Years” period (1949–1966³), minority-themed films experienced significant development, with 47 films produced, covering nearly 20 ethnic groups. These films were characterized by distinct forms and content. They primarily served a strong domestic political function, aiming to reflect and promote the party's ethnic policies, consolidate ethnic unity, and foster national identity (Rao, 2015). However, with the onset of the “Cultural Revolution” in 1966, the production of minority-themed films was forcibly halted, only to resume in 1975. Between 1975 and 1979, over 20 minority-themed films were released. Nevertheless, influenced by creative concepts such as the “Three Prominent,”⁴ the quality of these films was not high, and their impact was limited.

Chinese minority-themed films also served commercial and entertainment functions. These two functions are closely intertwined with the political function, as films must be accepted by the market and audience to fulfill their political objectives. During the “Seventeen Years” period, minority-themed films portrayed love in a relaxed manner, with protagonists generally depicted as affable and embodying humanism and ethnic charm, thus gaining favor from domestic and international audiences⁵ (Shi & Huang, 2019). These characteristics effectively catered to the commercial and entertainment functions of films while also facilitating the fulfillment of their political function.

1.1.2. Stage Two: Revival (1980–1991)

In December 1981, with the promotion and leadership of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the China Writers Association, the “National Ethnic Minority Literary Creation Award” was established to promote the development of Chinese minority-themed films. This event was held every

²The “planned economy era” in China refers to the period from 1949 to 1978 when the government centrally controlled economic activities through five-year plans, state-owned enterprises, and strict regulations, limiting market mechanisms and private sector growth.

³The “Seventeen Years” period (1949–1966) in China was characterized by phases of nation-building, economic policies like the Great Leap Forward, political restructuring, and the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, each leaving a lasting impact on Chinese society.

⁴The concept of the “Three Prominent” denotes the idealistic and metaphysical approach to artistic creation promoted by Jiang Qing during the Cultural Revolution. This model emphasizes highlighting positive characters among all characters, showcasing the main heroic characters among positive characters, and spotlighting the most significant central character among the main heroic characters.

⁵Due to differences in ideology, these films mainly have an impact on some developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, excluding developed Western (English-speaking) countries and regions.

three years and included a special award category for ethnic films called the “Tenglong Award.” In 1997, the “Ethnic Minority Literary Creation Award” and the “Tenglong Award” were merged into the “Junma Award.” It was stipulated that the “Junma Award” for ethnic minority-themed television would be held every two years, while the “Junma Award” for ethnic minority-themed films would be held every four years. The “Junma Award” became the highest honor for ethnic minority literature, film, and television arts after the reform and opening up period. It represented the state’s top-level design for integrating and unifying the evaluation of ethnic minority literature and arts. This consolidation reflected the special attention and support given by the state to ethnic minority literature and arts. However, compared to the “Seventeen Years” period, the purpose of support had changed significantly, with a weakening of propaganda for ethnic policies and a shift towards focusing on the representation and protection of ethnic minority cultures.

During this stage, with further ideological liberation, Chinese minority-themed films began to explore a plethora of new perspectives, such as reflecting the historical legends, customs, and traditions of ethnic minorities, thereby highlighting their distinct personalities. Films such as “On the Hunting Ground,” “The Horse Thief,” and “Sacrifice of Youth” were produced (Shi & Huang, 2019). These films depicted the lives of over ten ethnic groups, including the Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Zhuang, Wa, Yi, Dai, She, Bai, Jingpo, Hani, and Yugur. During this period, approximately 106 Chinese minority-themed films were produced. However, despite the increased efforts of reform and opening up, the market and audience for Chinese minority-themed films during this period remained primarily domestic.

1.1.3. Stage Three: Exploration (1992–2000)

Beginning in 1993, the film industry underwent a transition towards marketization, marked by the cancellation of the “Junma Award” for minority-themed films and television, signaling the government’s shift towards promoting ethnic minority films and television in the market. However, this attempt at marketization led to a significant decline in the quality of minority-themed films in the subsequent years (Shi & Huang, 2019). During this period, the primary focus was on adapting to the requirements of a socialist market economy. Due to reduced government funding, the production of Chinese minority-themed films decreased, with only around 60 minority-themed films being released. At this time, Chinese minority-themed films began to emphasize the incorporation of commercial elements and strived to adapt to the market economy for better development.

Of relevance to this study, it was observed that in 1993, there were the first instances of films featuring English subtitles, with two films being co-produced by mainland film studios and Hong Kong companies. Subsequently, several films had English-translated titles or credits. Although these films had incomplete English subtitles, they reflected the perspective of minority-themed film practitioners towards international dissemination in the face of the market economy.

1.1.4. Stage Four: Transformation (2001–2019)

Entering the 21st century, propelled by the wave of globalization, and particularly after China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the government introduced a series of policies and initiatives for the industrialization reform of the film industry in 2003 and 2004. With a large influx of private capital into production, distribution, and screening, ethnic minority films once again saw significant development, yielding a number of outstanding works. During this period, minority-themed films took on greater significance and possessed enhanced value for international dissemination. With the government’s continued efforts to strengthen mechanisms for nurturing talent in minority-themed filmmaking, this period saw the emergence of many ethnic minority directors and filmmakers. Their involvement further propelled the development of ethnic minority “mother tongue films”.

During this period, the government increased its support for China’s ethnic minority film industry. In 2010, the Beijing International Film Festival began hosting the Beijing Ethnic Film Exhibition, while in 2013, the China Ethnic Minority Film Project was launched. Additionally, comprehensive film industry policies further promoted the development of ethnic minority-themed films, playing a significant role in promoting multi-ethnic unity and opposing external interference.

The development of Chinese minority-themed films has experienced four stages, yet there are still significant shortcomings in terms of dissemination. Domestically, dissemination often results in short-lived interest or is confined to museum screenings, while internationally, these films often receive awards but lack significant resonance among general audiences. Overall, Chinese minority-themed films have consistently carried strong political functions, thus receiving attention and substantial funding from the government. Meanwhile, amidst evolving political and economic environments, Chinese minority-themed films have gradually adjusted their market adaptability, offering diverse entertainment experiences to audiences at home and abroad.

1.2. *The English Audience Dissemination of Chinese Minority-Themed Films*⁶

Chinese minority-themed films, like non-minority-themed films, serve a function in international dissemination, allowing the world to understand China's development, fostering friendships between China and other countries, and promoting global peace and development.

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese films had some dissemination in English-speaking countries, especially during the Second World War. In order to garner support from developed countries such as Britain and the United States, the Nationalist government actively organized the translation of Chinese films into English, which played a certain role in promoting China's resistance against Japanese aggression (Jin & Shao, 2015).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, due to significant ideological differences and changes in the international situation, China had very limited international exchanges with English-speaking countries. This situation was also reflected in the development of China's film industry. Although China established formal diplomatic relations with major English-speaking countries such as the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in 1979, 1972, 1972, and 1970, respectively, China's reform and opening up did not begin until 1978, and progress in various fields was gradual. It was not until the 21st century, after China's accession to the World Trade Organization, that China significantly promoted its external affairs, accelerating its exchanges with English-speaking countries.

On December 11, 2001, China formally became a member of the World Trade Organization. On December 12, 2001, the State Council of China approved the "Film Management Regulations" (Decree No. 342 of the State Council of the People's Republic of China), which specifically proposed supporting the development of the film industry in ethnic minority areas, such as providing special development funds for Chinese minority-themed films and collaborating with foreign institutions to produce films. On December 13, 2001, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued the "Implementation Measures (Trial) for Actively Promoting the Reform of Broadcasting and Television Group Integrator", laying a solid policy foundation for the development of China's film industry in the new century and preparing for the new peak of film industry development. On December 24, 2001, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued the "Implementation Rules for the Overseas Project of Radio and Television" (Trial) (Document No. 1494 of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television), and formulated implementation rules for the radio and television "going global" project in accordance with the "Notice of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Transmitting Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the News, Publishing, Radio, Film, and Television Industry" (Zhongbanfa [2001] No. 17 issued by General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China). At the same time, according to the "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Prosperity and Development of the Film Industry" (Guobanfa [2010] No. 9) issued by the General Office of the State Council on January 21, 2010, it was necessary to actively implement the strategy of "going global" for films and strive to enhance international influence. At the end of 2012, the International Channel established a film and television translation center, providing an excellent platform for the translation of film and television dramas. On October 13, 2013, the National-Level Project of Chinese Minority-themed Films was established with the aim of promoting the creation of Chinese minority-themed films. In the form of "one ethnic group, one film,"⁷ a feature film is produced for each ethnic minority to fill the gap in the absence of films of their own ethnic themes. The project has been steadily progressing and has achieved fruitful results. On July 7, 2014, the Production Base of the National-Level Project of Chinese Minority-themed Films was established in Xingmei Jinsheng Film and Television City. On November 10, 2015, the National-Level Project of Chinese Minority-themed Films reviewed and approved the "Implementation Plan for the National-Level Project of Chinese Minority-themed Films" and the "Selection Method for the Selected Works of the National-Level Project of Chinese Minority-themed Films," formulating and implementing relevant policies for the development of Chinese minority-themed films. In addition, Chinese minority-themed films can also receive more assistance through the National Multilingual Film and Television Translation Base (established in Beijing in January 2014), which deepens the work of external dissemination.

In January 2016, the "China Film Projection"⁸ platform, as a global distribution platform for domestic films, was officially established, beginning to systematically promote the entry of domestic

⁶The English audience here may include viewers from non-English-speaking countries who can watch the films with English subtitles.

⁷The main goal of the project is to produce a narrative feature film for each ethnic minority, ensuring representation of their cultural themes through the "one ethnic group, one film" approach. Additionally, the project aims to stimulate artistic and cinematic creativity among ethnic minorities, cultivate professional talents in minority arts, particularly in film production, and increase awareness, concern, and support for films depicting ethnic minority themes.

⁸Since 2019, under the vigorous promotion of the Central Propaganda Department, the "China Film Projection" project has been adjusted to the "Overseas Film Projection" program. The funding allocation has increased to millions annually, supporting the overseas screening of approximately 20 domestic films selected through nationwide solicitation within the film industry. Films such as *The Battle at Lake Changjin* have received funding for their distribution overseas, further advancing the international dissemination of Chinese cinema.

films into the global market. On September 26, 2019, the National Multilingual Film and Television Translation Base of China Central Radio and Television Station was stationed in Shanghai, further accelerating the pace of promoting domestic films into the international market.

In recent years, several government documents have specifically mentioned translation subsidies. On February 5, 2016, the General Office of the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television issued a notice regarding the selection of excellent film and television works for translation assistance (Document No. [2016] 17 of the General Office of New SARFT). On March 8, 2016, the National Film Industry Development Special Fund Management Committee issued a notice rewarding outstanding domestic films for their overseas promotion efforts (Document No. [2016]2 of the Film Specialization Committee). On November 7, 2016, during the 24th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress, the "Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China" was passed (Chairman's Order No. 54 of the 12th Session), which highlighted the state's support for the foreign language translation of outstanding films and the comprehensive utilization of diplomatic, cultural, educational, and other foreign exchange resources to conduct overseas promotion activities. In the guidelines for applying for funding for film international exchanges and overseas distribution promotion work using central-level film special funds in 2018 and 2019, translation fees were specifically included in the production expenditure.

However, currently, no scholars have examined the relevance of the English translation of Chinese minority-themed films to policies, nor have any scholars specifically studied their reception in English-speaking countries and regions. Regarding the overall situation of Chinese film international dissemination, Huang *et al.* (2015) pointed out that the acceptance of Chinese films' cultural spirit and national image by American audiences is much lower than that of other continents. They believe that Chinese films lack distinctive features, especially in terms of "Patriotic Sentiment," "National Primacy," and "Subtle Restraint," which are rated lower. At the same time, American viewers' frequency of watching Chinese films and their impressions of Chinese films are correspondingly lower. This evaluation and impression must be taken seriously, distinguishing whether it is caused by English subtitles or the film's story itself.

Therefore, we believe that it is essential to strengthen relevant and targeted research, specifically studying the reception of Chinese minority-themed films in English-speaking countries and regions and the current status of English translation. In fact, research in this area is almost nonexistent, which will hinder the communication and dissemination of Chinese minority-themed films in English-speaking countries, affecting the realization of their various functions, as well as adjustments and improvements to related policies, filming, and translation activities.

1.3. Three Stages of English Translation of Minority-Themed Films

The translation of Chinese films into English has been a significant factor constraining the internationalization of Chinese cinema. The English translation of Chinese minority-themed films has always been closely linked to national policies. The purpose of translation is to facilitate the international dissemination of films, enhance cross-cultural communication, enable English-speaking audiences to understand Chinese values, and contribute to the construction of a better world alongside people from other countries.

The history of Chinese cinema development spans over a century, with its translation history extending beyond a hundred years. As early as between 1917 and 1927, Chinese film companies actively translated domestic films into English, with as many as 97 productions (Jin, 2013, p. 170). This period witnessed the early efforts of Chinese filmmakers to promote Chinese cinema overseas, such as the 1927 silent fantasy film "Pan Si Cave," an adaptation of "Journey to the West," which had subtitles in Chinese, English, and Norwegian (Li, 2014, p. 55). In recent years, as China's film and television industry has ventured onto the global stage, the government has vigorously promoted the international dissemination of Chinese film and television works through initiatives such as the "China-Africa Film and Television Cooperation Project," the "Silk Road Film and Television Bridge Project," and the "Contemporary Works Translation Project." In addition to government projects, private initiatives have also undertaken the translation of Chinese film and television works for international audiences, presenting two main pathways: official and non-official translation modes (Jin, 2017).

Indeed, English translations of Chinese minority-themed films have existed since early times, albeit rarely and often incomplete. It was not until after 1949 that China produced a significant number of minority-themed films, which received varying degrees and angles of attention from the state at different times. Based on our observations, since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the history of English translation of minority-themed films can be roughly divided into three stages.

1.3.1. Stage One: From the 1950s to the 1980s

During the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, Chinese minority-themed films were hardly translated into English. This was primarily due to ideological differences and limited interaction between China

and major Western capitalist countries. While China established diplomatic relations with English-speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada mostly in the 1970s, political and cultural disparities hindered the dissemination of Chinese films in English-speaking nations, resulting in minimal translation of minority-themed films. Moreover, China's cultural policies during this period mainly criticized capitalist culture, leading to strict restrictions on foreign exchanges, which further impeded the international dissemination of minority-themed films. As noted by Zhang *et al.* (2020), "Political relations, ideological barriers, and lack of cultural exchange between China and Western capitalist countries have limited the performance of Chinese films in the international market".

1.3.2. Stage Two: in the 1990s

As China's reform and opening-up policies advanced further and international exchanges increased, the Chinese film industry began to encounter new opportunities for development. During this period, the government stepped up its support for the film industry, aiming to propel the internationalization process forward. However, despite the emergence of some translations for minority-themed films, their quantity remained relatively small, and the quality was inconsistent. Many of these films suffered from incomplete translations and varying translation quality, which was a common challenge at the time. Meanwhile, as China's connections with the international market strengthened, minority-themed films still faced numerous hurdles in terms of international dissemination.

Expanding on the cinematic landscape of the 1990s, notable translations of minority-themed films surfaced, albeit in limited numbers and with varying degrees of accuracy. For instance, films such as "The Story of Yunnan" and "In a Distant Land," both released in 1993, received English translations. However, these translations were incomplete, lacking translations for titles and crew members and offering only partial dialogue translations. Similarly, "The Sorrow of Brook Steppe" (1995), a poignant portrayal of Mongolian themes produced by the Beijing Film Studio, was translated into English. However, the translation proved imperfect, with discrepancies in accuracy and crucial dialogue being omitted. Likewise, "Genghis Khan" (1997), another film with Mongolian themes produced by the Inner Mongolia Film Studio, had translations for its title and crew members but lacked dialogue translations.

1.3.3. Stage Three: In the 21st Century

Since the turn of the 21st century, the Chinese film industry has undergone rapid development, particularly following China's accession to the WTO, which further intensified government support for the industry. Notably, government policies explicitly mentioning support for translation fees for outstanding films have provided more opportunities for the translation of minority-themed films into English. During this period, while some challenges persisted, an increasing number of films began to receive English translations, showcasing higher quality translations in various details. Some films even garnered international recognition, being showcased and awarded at international film festivals. However, despite certain advancements, issues such as unclear translator identities and inconsistent translation choices persisted. Additionally, the temporal and spatial characteristics inherent to films posed challenges for English subtitle translation, including the instantaneous nature of dialogue and the limitations of screen space.

While many challenges remained, it is encouraging to note that more films received English translations, with some demonstrating meticulous attention to detail and maintaining high translation quality. These achievements primarily manifested in:

1. Some films featuring complete English subtitles, including titles, crew members, dialogue, and sponsor information.
2. Sufficient respect shown towards minority translators, with some films providing comprehensive translator information.
3. High quality translations in certain films, reflecting diverse translator compositions.
4. Consideration of political and commercial functions when selecting films for English translation.

However, many translated films still suffered from incomplete translations, primarily evidenced by:

1. Low status of translators, with many films failing to specify translator identities, leaving translators largely anonymous. Even when translator identities were disclosed, their information was often incomplete, lacking details such as ethnicity or nationality.

2. Insufficiently serious annotation of translator information. For example, the English consultant for the 2010 film "Deep in the Clouds" was listed as "Sister Du," raising doubts about the authenticity of such names.

3. Incomplete names for some foreign translators, with only partial names (either first or last) provided. For instance, the translator for "The Spring of Bao Yin Tu," produced by Beijing Noon Oriental Advertising Co., was simply listed as "Pierre".

4. Inconsistent translation choices, with some films only translating certain parts of crew member information, leading to discrepancies. For example, the front half of crew members for “Women of the Nima Family” (2008), produced by Inner Mongolia Blue Hometown Film Co., was translated, while the back half was not.

5. Many films still only had their titles translated, with such translations potentially being carried out solely to comply with policy requirements.

1.4. Research Status of Minority-Themed Films Translation

In recent years, researches on film and television translation have seen rapid development both domestically and internationally, covering various aspects. Scholars such as [Díaz-Cintas and Remael \(2007\)](#), [Ranzato and Zanotti \(2018\)](#), [Pérez-González \(2014, 2018\)](#), [House \(2018\)](#), [Soffritti \(2019\)](#), as well as researchers like [Ma \(2016\)](#), and [Xiao \(2017\)](#), have made significant contributions to this field. Their work not only addresses technical issues in film and television translation but also incorporates factors such as ideology and poetics, which are of interest to cultural translation scholars, and even delves into details like subtitle technology.

The selection, production, and marketing of film scripts are often constrained by various ideological factors to ensure the realization of their political direction and function, while also requiring sufficient entertainment value to survive in the market. Therefore, translators need to balance political purposes and entertainment demands during the translation process to ensure the reproduction of the original work’s amusement.

Despite in-depth studies on the overseas dissemination of Chinese films and television by many experts, there is little research specifically focused on the dissemination strategies of minority-themed Chinese films. Representative works in this regard include studies by [Yan \(2014\)](#) and [Huang et al. \(2018, 2019\)](#). Although the translation of minority-themed films shares some commonalities with the translation of other types of films, its uniqueness has been largely overlooked.

Overall, issues in film and television translation involve language, economic, communication, and sociocultural ideological perspectives. Language perspectives are typically regarded as technical issues, while other aspects involve functional issues. However, there are still some shortcomings in current research. In terms of functionality, the scope and breadth of research need to be expanded. Most studies focus on translation techniques and pay little attention to the influence of ideology on the selection of translated texts and translations. Regarding technical aspects, a targeted translation methodology has yet to be developed.

As early as the 1930s, Chinese silent films began to use English subtitles, as evidenced by the earliest surviving Chinese film, *Labor and Love* ([Jin, 2017](#)).

The issue of language is paramount for Chinese films to gain international traction. Scholars have emphasized translation as a crucial constraint on the internationalization of Chinese cinema ([Ding et al., 2013](#); [Huang et al., 2018](#); [Li, 2011](#)). A survey conducted by the China Academy of Arts’ Institute of Film and Television Arts among audiences in Belt and Road regions revealed that over 30% of respondents found Chinese films’ logical thinking difficult to comprehend, and nearly 70% found the subtitles challenging ([Ding & Shi, 2017](#)). We posit that these difficulties are interrelated, as problems with subtitle translation may lead to difficulties in logical comprehension. Similarly, [Huang et al. \(2015\)](#) observed that her research team’s survey in Belt and Road regions revealed poor dissemination effectiveness, particularly noting the challenge of comprehending subtitles. Her research yielded four key conclusions: firstly, the dissemination effect is unsatisfactory; secondly, the internet serves as the primary channel for accessing information on the dissemination and promotion of Chinese films; thirdly, subtitle translations are often difficult to comprehend; and fourthly, the acceptance of Chinese genre films is gradually diversifying, suggesting substantial potential for enhancing the external dissemination of Chinese genre films.

Translators also echo similar sentiments. For instance, [Chen and Song \(2020\)](#) pointed out that insufficient attention to translation has hindered Chinese films’ internationalization, a sentiment shared by many industry professionals.

At the turn of the 21st century, [Qian \(2000\)](#) asserted that the audience for dubbed films far exceeds that of literary translations, highlighting the significance of audiovisual translation in society. However, research on overseas film subtitle translation in China lags behind, with limited scope, narrow perspectives, and minimal impact ([Liu et al., 2011](#)).

Traditionally, research on film and television translation has focused mainly on the handling of Chinese-English translation issues, primarily on a technical level. Studies on Chinese film translation strategies mainly fall into two categories: Chinese translation strategies and English translation strategies, encompassing debates on domestication and foreignization ([Feng & Hong, 2015](#)), as well as cultural and aesthetic perspectives ([He, 2001](#); [He & Wu, 2013](#)). However, few studies have explored English translation strategies for minority-themed Chinese films. Yet, with over 80 distinct ethnic

minority languages in China, some with their own writing systems, and 27 exhibiting cross-border characteristics, existing research findings may not fully apply to subtitle translation for minority-themed films (Dai *et al.*, 2000).

Currently, English translations of minority-themed films suffer from numerous issues such as mistranslation, misunderstanding, and spelling errors. These discrepancies extend to inconsistencies in the transliteration of place names and personal names within the same ethnic group, significantly impairing international audience comprehension and acceptance, and hindering the external dissemination of Chinese minority-themed films. These technical translation issues are closely associated with prevailing translation strategies and methods. Specifically, they reflect inadequate understanding of linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and English among translators, as well as insufficient emphasis on these differences by scholars in the field of audiovisual translation studies. Therefore, we argue that there is an urgent need for a more systematic examination of Chinese-English linguistic and cultural disparities. While the majority of minority-themed films only involve translation between Chinese and English, given the existence of numerous minority language “mother-tongue films,” it is imperative to address not only general issues in film translation but also the linguistic translation challenges specific to minority-themed films.

Since the 1990s, research in audiovisual translation has surged forward. Unlike traditional text-based translation, audiovisual translation deals with a blend of auditory, visual, and temporal elements, all within the constraints of space and time (Qian, 2000). This unique form of language is characterized by its auditory, visual, instantaneous, mass-mediated, and context-free nature (House, 2018, p. 170).

In this context, Chen’s (2019) comprehensive study on overseas film subtitle translation, viewed through the lens of multimodality and semiotics, sheds light on the profound impact of visual symbols on subtitle translation. However, Wang and Wu (2020) caution against attributing specific linguistic phenomena in translation solely to visual elements, warning against overlooking fundamental language differences. Their comparative analysis reveals instances where translations align perfectly with subtitles in the absence of visual cues. They stress the paramount importance of acknowledging and addressing language disparities in the translation of minority-themed films.

Although systematic studies on the English translation of Chinese minority-themed films are lacking, a few scholars have examined individual films. Translated films generally fall into three categories: those with only the translated title, those with both the title and crew translated, and those with additional dialogue translated. While films in the third category may exhibit varying translation quality, it often correlates with the composition of the translation team, consisting of ethnic language translators, Chinese translators, and native English speakers. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between translator composition and translation quality.

In addition to these specific issues related to Chinese minority-themed films, general technical challenges in audiovisual translation must also be considered. These include how the time and space constraints of film subtitles affect translation, improving title translations, and handling non-ethnic cultural and political terms in everyday dialogue.

Traditionally, domestic film studies in China have lacked consideration of non-linguistic factors influencing translation. Currently, with China’s emphasis on external exchanges through initiatives like the “Belt and Road” and the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” the role of film in propagating Chinese culture has become increasingly prominent. Minority-themed Chinese films are distinctive in that they reflect the cultural and political developments of China’s ethnic minorities, with unique cultural and political contexts. Their English translations, besides catering to the entertainment needs of English-speaking audiences, also carry additional diplomatic functions.

It is worth noting that hostile forces often distort China’s ethnic policies and promote double standards on human rights, particularly in regions like Xinjiang and Tibet. Therefore, there is a need for more English translations of films from these regions to portray the happy lives of the people in Xinjiang and Tibet under the New China. However, the current situation regarding the English translation of minority-themed Chinese films, including those from Tibet and Xinjiang, is far from ideal. Hence, it is crucial to identify and address these issues promptly.

2. CONCLUSION

It is evident from both scholarly discourse and industry perspectives that translation constitutes a significant impediment to the international projection of Chinese cinema. However, merely recognizing this obstacle without concerted efforts to address it is insufficient. This observation resonates profoundly with the current status quo concerning minority-themed Chinese films seeking global recognition.

This study has undertaken a comprehensive review of the scholarly advancements in film translation research, both domestically and internationally. It has delineated the developmental stages, production

realities, and existing practices and theoretical underpinnings concerning the English translation of minority-themed Chinese films. Notably, it underscores that the English translation of such films transcends mere technical intricacies; rather, it entails a multifaceted functional dimension. In essence, to fulfill the intended functions of minority-themed Chinese films, their translation into English necessitates deliberations not only on linguistic nuances but also on strategic decisions pertaining to film selection, translator selection, and the roles of various stakeholders in the translation process.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the imperative of attending to the idiosyncrasies of minority-themed Chinese films and their distinct features in English translation. It underscores the pressing need to address these idiosyncratic challenges to facilitate the effective dissemination and cultural exchange of minority-themed Chinese films on the global stage.

FUNDING

This article is funded by the Doctoral Research Start-up Fund project titled “A Study on the English Translation and International Communication Effectiveness of Chinese Films” (Project No. SLBS2357) of School of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Chen, Y. (2019). *Translating Film Subtitles into Chinese: A Multimodal Study*. Springer.
- Chen, X., & Song, X. (2020, February 19). Senior translator interprets translation and the overseas expansion of domestic films. *Beijing Evening News*. <http://www.taihainet.com/news/pastime/dianying/2020-02-19/2357407.html>.
- Dai, Q., Cheng, Y., Fu, A., & He, J. (2000). *Research on the Application of Minority Languages and Scripts in China*. Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House.
- Ding, Y., Chu, S., & Dong, X. (2013). On the international communication and overseas market competition strategy of Chinese films in 2012. *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2013(4), 19–46.
- Ding, Y., & Shi, L. (2017). “One Belt One Road” and the new development of Chinese films. *Arts Criticism*, 2017(12), 47–58.
- Díaz-Cintas, J., & Remael, A. (2007). *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*. St Jerome.
- Feng, Q., & Hong, D. (2015). Rhetorical transformation and English translation of Chinese film titles. *Journal of PLA Foreign Languages Institute*, 2015(4), 113–119.
- Gu, G. (2015). *Research on the production and communication of New China's minority-themed films* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Shanghai Jiao Tong University.
- He, Y. (2001). Translation theory and methods of film titles. *Foreign Language Education*, 2001(1), 56–58.
- He, J., & Wu, B. (2013). On cultural imagery of Chinese and Western love. *Academics*, 7, 267–274.
- House, J. (2018). *Translation: The Basics*. Routledge.
- Hu, P. (2013a). Naming and rhetoric: The “elemental problem” of minority-themed films in China. *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2013(5), 102–112.
- Hu, P. (2013b). National image in minority-themed films. *Film Art*, 2013(2), 63–67.
- Huang, H., Sun, Z., Wang, C., & Yang, Z. (2018). Chinese films and the dissemination of national image: Report on the dissemination of Chinese films in North America in 2017. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 2018(1), 22–28.
- Huang, H., Yang, Z., Gao, H., & Zhang, W. (2015). International communication channels of Chinese films and their role in constructing national image: One of the 2014 annual series of “Chinese Film International Communication” research reports. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 2015(2), 13–24.
- Huang, H., Yang, X., Wang, X., & Yang, Z. (2019). Study on the influence of Chinese films on the European spread of Chinese culture: Report on the European communication of Chinese films in 2018. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 2019(1), 1–6.
- Jin, H. (2013). *Research on the Translation of Chinese Silent Films (1905–1949)*. Peking University Press.
- Jin, H. (2017). Fan translation and cross-border communication of Chinese film and television: A case study of Viki website. *Television Research*, 2017(10), 85–88.
- Jin, H., & Shao, H. (2015). A preliminary study on the English translation of Chinese silent films. *Contemporary Cinema*, 2015(8), 118–121.
- Li, Y. (2011). The international communication journey and path of Chinese films. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 2011(3), 56–59.
- Li, Z. (2014). Another Hole of Heaven: The history and interpretation of the 1927 supernatural film Pan Si Cave. *Contemporary Cinema*, 2014(6), 48–58.
- Liu, D., Fan, Z., & Wang, H. (2011). Development and current situation analysis of Chinese film and television translation research in 14 years. *Foreign Language Education*, 2011(1), 103–107.
- Ma, Z. (2016). Research on the English translation of domestic films and TV dramas. In Y. Deng (Ed.), *The Ferryman: Cross-cultural translation and communication* (pp. 83–91). Central Compilation and Translation Press.
- Pérez-González, L. (Ed.) (2018). *The Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation*. Routledge.
- Pérez-González, L. (2014). *Audiovisual Translation: Theories, Methods and Issues*. Routledge.
- Qian, S. (2000). Film and television translation: An increasingly important field in the translation garden. *Chinese Translation*, 2000(1), 61–65.
- Ranzato, L., & Zanotti, S. (2018). *Linguistic and Cultural Representation in Audiovisual Translation*. Routledge.
- Rao, S. (2011). *History of Chinese Ethnic Minority Films*. China Film Press.
- Rao, S. (2015). Ethnic minority films: diversity and its multicultural values. *Contemporary Literary World*, 2015, 4–9.

- Shi, B., & Huang, R. (2019). New China Ethnic Minority films: Achievement function strategy—Based on the perspective of Chinese film sociology (1949–2019). *Research on National Art*, 2019(6), 17–27.
- Soffritti, M. (2019). *Multimodal Corpora in Audiovisual Translation Studies*. Routledge.
- Wang, J., & Wu, B. (2020). Critical review on translating film subtitles into Chinese—A multi-modal study. *Oriental Translation*, 2020(5), 92–95.
- Xiao, W. (2017). *English-Chinese Audio-Visual Translation Practical Tutorial*. East China University of Science and Technology Press.
- Yan, C. (2014). Translation and international communication of domestic film and television works. *Chinese Translation*, 2014(4), 8–9.
- Zhang, G., Zhang, Q., & Huang, D. (2020). Impact of political connection strength on the internationalization outcome of Chinese firms: Perspectives from market exploration and technology acquisition. *Sustainability*, 12(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12041617>.