



## Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation

Yves Gambier and Haina Jin, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2024.  
xiii+253 pp.

Reviewed by Baorong Wang

To cite this article: Reviewed by Baorong Wang (2026) Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation, Translation Review, 125:1, 87-90, DOI: [10.1080/07374836.2026.2689858](https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2026.2689858)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2026.2689858>



Published online: 17 Jul 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 28



View related articles [↗](#)

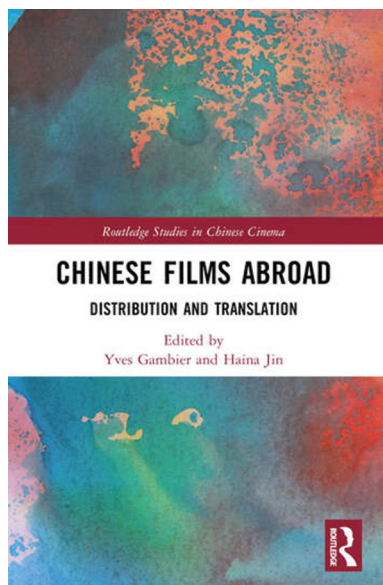


View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Yves Gambier and Haina Jin, eds.** *Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. xiii+253 pp.

*Reviewed by Baorong Wang*



Cinema can boost a country's soft power, as exemplified by Hollywood for the U.S.'s great might. Chinese cinema has a long history of transcultural outreach, starting with the screening of *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (庄子试妻, 1913) in Los Angeles in 1917. It was joined by more than 100 silent films made by several Shanghai-based film companies during the 1920s. Featuring both Chinese and English intertitles, they were also intended for the foreign nationals residing in China and the Southeast Asian audiences.<sup>1</sup> These early attempts were succeeded by the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s film export programs since the early 1950s, the Hong Kong kung fu wave in the 1970s, the rise of the fifth-generation Chinese filmmakers including Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige in the mid-1980s, and the recent release of blockbusters like *The Wandering Earth II* (流浪地球2, 2023) and *Nezha II* (哪吒2, 2025) as part of the "Chinese film going global" policy. Despite this and the fact that China is now the world's third largest movie producer, Chinese films are reportedly "not competitive with those from the most developed countries" for various reasons.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, the publication of the edited volume *Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation* should be welcome as an impressive sequel to the slim book, *Chinese Cinemas in Translation and Dissemination*, edited by Haina Jin (Routledge, 2022).

With twelve qualitatively uneven contributions from academics, distributors, filmmakers, and literary

translators, the book aims to explore Chinese-language films shown abroad between the 1920s and the present, covering a dozen countries in Asia (Chapters 1–3), Africa (Chapter 4), Europe (Chapters 5–9), the United States (Chapters 10–11), and Latin America (Chapter 12). Films from mainland China are the focus; also frequently discussed are Hong Kong cinema and Sino-foreign co-productions, while those from Taiwan and the broader Chinese diaspora are addressed only occasionally.

Yves Gambier and Jin open their introductory piece by noting Chinese cinema's "recent breakthrough" in Finland (1), evidenced by a variety of films screened and emergent co-productions. Then they sketch the history of Chinese cinema distributed abroad, highlighting the three key issues addressed in the volume—namely, distribution channels and strategies, agents of transcultural exchanges, and modes of film translation—in an attempt to identify the difficulties in researching this challenging topic, before summarizing the twelve chapters.

Chapters 1–3 address Chinese cinema's dissemination in three Asian countries. In their contribution, "From *Benshi* to Subtitled: Translating Chinese-Language Cinema in/for Japan," Markus Nornes and Nakajima Seio explore the trajectory of Chinese films distributed and translated there, based on national archives and personal interviews. Prior to the mid-1980s, not many Chinese films entered the Japanese market, despite a "kung fu film boom" in the 1970s (22). The late 1980s saw a steady inflow of fifth-generation mainland films, popular Hong Kong films, and New Taiwan Cinema. Concurrently, there was a shift to direct subtitling from Chinese, and three translation modes, i.e., scholarly, professional, and nonprofessional subtitling, came into being. Today the film distribution network is gaining momentum thanks to the work of the agents involved. Interestingly, the standard practice of using intertitles in the silent era was rendered unnecessary by the *benshi* who would narrate and perform live foreign films in Japanese.

In Chapter 2, "Transnational by Means of Hyperlocal: Sinophone Cinema in Singkawang (West Kalimantan)," Josh Stenberg examines the production of Hakka Chinese films there and their significance for the local Chinese community. Initiated to rectify the town's image as a source of smuggling to Taiwan and to showcase its unique culture, these films often integrate Hakka community life with conventional horror and romance patterns of Indonesian cinema. (Some of them are available on YouTube.) Acted in Hakka by the locals, they are subtitled in Indonesian, sometimes also in Mandarin Chinese, evincing the filmmakers' "commitment both to partaking in a national culture and being part of a diasporic cultural network" (45). Stenberg cautions that while their

hyperlocal focus deserves transnational dissemination, diversity of culture and experience is at risk of being elided in Sinophone cinema moving toward production in standard languages.

Kyung Hye Kim's contribution, "The Interlocking Cogs of Audiovisual Translation and the Socio-political Landscape," traces the history of screen-culture exchanges between Korea (with a focus on South Korea) and mainland China, arguing that it is largely dictated by bilateral relations. During Japan's colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, virtually no Chinese films landed on the Korean Peninsula; a dozen silent films were co-produced in Shanghai but could not be screened in Korea. From the Korean War through the 1970s, South Korean audiences had access to films from Taiwan and Hong Kong with ready-made Korean subtitles. Meanwhile, North Korean films were screened in the PRC, but Chinese outreach to the North Korean market is not discussed. In the 1980s, mainland Chinese films found their way into South Korea, often via a third party. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing in 1992 brought in a flurry of subtitled Chinese films, only to be halted in 2016 when the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system was deployed in South Korea. Sino-Korean cultural exchanges resurged after 2020. Today Korean audiences access Chinese films through a variety of channels.

In Chapter 4, "The Trans-narration of Chinese Kung Fu Films by Swahili Language DJs in Tanzania," filmmaker Martin Mhando introduces a unique mode of audiovisual translation commonly practiced in relatively poor, low-literacy Tanzania. It started with the Hong Kong kung fu film craze in the 1970s when pirated video copies were trans-narrated into Swahili. Video narrators, popularly known as "DJs" in Tanzania, used to perform live film translation and commentary in video parlors, or mediatize their interpreting efforts in the form of VHS cassettes and DVDs with Swahili voice-over. Today, piracy remains prevalent in Tanzania, although DVDs have given way to USB flash drives and YouTube downloadable streams. A broader variety of Chinese films are now trans-narrated for the local audiences. What might have been discussed in the chapter, too, is the quality of trans-narrated Chinese films and its impact on reception.

Excellent research and well written for the most part, Chapters 5–9 explore Chinese cinema's distribution and translation in Europe, focusing on Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Austria, and the U.K., respectively. In Chapter 5, "Chinese Cinema in Spain," Helena Casas-Tost and Sara Rovira-Esteva examine the state of affairs in Spain between the early 1970s and 2021, based on a meticulous analysis of distribution data and interviews with key agents. The main findings and conclusions are: Spain screened the first Chinese movie in 1972, that is, *Four Moods* (喜怒哀乐, 1970) produced and shot in Taiwan, followed by a limited number of Chinese films released every year until a sharp rise in 2004; film festivals are the main channel for Chinese film distribution in

Spain, followed by Video on Demand (VOD) platforms and movie theaters; Hong Kong productions take the lion's share of audiences while those from the mainland and Taiwan are becoming increasingly competitive; drama and kung fu films have been the most popular genres, and Chinese films used to be subtitled or dubbed from Chinese for film festivals, whereas now mediated translation via English subtitles is the norm.

In Chapter 6, "Chinese Cinema at the Invitation of French Cinema Literati: Chinese Film Events and Festivals in France," Gong Zhang examines the key role "French cinema literati" have played in Chinese cinema's diffusion since the 1980s. He argues that both an industrial and a politico-diplomatic logic are at play, but the cinema literati's part stands out. As illustrated by four cases, some of the most influential Chinese cinema events were held in France owing to the initiation, orchestration, and promotion by French sinologists and cinephiles. This leads Zhang to suggest that Chinese cinema's diffusion abroad might be largely driven by the target countries' domestic factors, independently of China's robust film industry and "going global" policy. However, one wonders if there are more "domestic factors" to be investigated here, including commercial distribution companies of Chinese cinema which emerged in mid-1980s France after the rise of the fifth-generation filmmakers.<sup>3</sup>

In her contribution, "The Issue of 'Chineseness' in the Italian Translation of Chinese Films between the Early 1990s and 2018," Anna Di Toro aims to explore how the traits of Chineseness embodied in religious, philosophical, and ethical concepts are treated in dubbed Italian versions. In the opening section, she makes some insightful observations: in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, the awards won at major international film festivals are "a driving force" for the diffusion of foreign movies (125); Chinese films began to register box-office success in early-1990s Italy with the rise of the fifth-generation filmmakers, and imported Chinese films are usually translated into Italian via English scripts or subtitles. After comparing a dozen Chinese culture-specific items taken from ten films, for example, "*jianghu*" 江湖 (literally "rivers and lakes"), against their Italian renderings, she finds that traits of Chineseness tend to be simplified, domesticated, or explicated. She also notices some cases of poor synchrony, especially between gestures and voice, in the dubbed Italian versions, which can produce an alienating effect on Italian audiences.

In Chapter 8, "Patronage in Chinese Film Dissemination and Translation from 1971 to 1993: The German-Language Countries," film consultant Isabel Wolte explores the issue of film distribution patronage in Germany and Austria prior to 1993, when the PRC's state monopoly on film export loosened. Drawing on André Lefevere's notion of patronage defined as encompassing ideological, economic, and social status components, she observes that the China Film Export & Import Corporation (CFEIC) governed the ideological component by

controlling which movies could be exported and needed to be translated, whereas German distributors were often responsible for economic and status concerns. It was the CFEIC's policy to provide English, French, and Spanish translations for exported films, while translation into other languages was left in the hands of foreign distributors. Hence the shift from the Chinese side's sole patronage to Sino-foreign joint patronage regarding film translation. In German-speaking countries, Chinese films used to be subtitled (for film festivals), dubbed (for TV and commercial distribution), or live voice-overed (for special programs and animated films). The translator's use of English as a pivot language was and still is a common practice.

In Chapter 9, Carol O'Sullivan examines the history of Chinese-language film distribution and translation in the United Kingdom, based on a range of sources including U.K. newspapers, distributor records, film reviews, and interviews. In her judgment, Chinese productions were presented as a "recurring novelty" (167) in the early decades of sound film screening in the United Kingdom. Their exhibition, often linked with left-wing politics, was limited until the 1970s when Hong Kong kung fu films became tremendously popular. "Full recognition of Chinese cinema as an important national cinema" came in the 1980s (182), with the rise of the fifth-generation filmmakers and the Taiwan New Wave movies. Today Chinese films are an established part of specialized and popular film exhibition in the United Kingdom. Suggesting that the quality of translation impacts audience reception, O'Sullivan observes: foreign films imported into the United Kingdom were traditionally subtitled by native English speakers; prior to the 1980s, films from the mainland and Hong Kong were subtitled or dubbed at the point of origin, and many translations were "notoriously bad" (180). Since the mid-1980s, the work of John Minchinton, Tony Rayns, Linda Jaivin, Chris Berry, and others has contributed to high-quality English subtitling.

Chapters 10–11 address the landscape of Chinese cinema in the U.S., albeit with a different focus. In "Film Audiences as Context for Translation: Three Sketches of Chinese Cinema in the United States," Cameron L. White explores how Chinese films undergoing varying methods of cultural translation (in the broadest sense) impacted American audiences, both inside and outside the movie theater. This was first explored in the screening of Chinese-language films in U.S. Chinatowns. While translation into English was not always involved, Chinatown residents sought out the cinema as a site for engaging with cultural and linguistic differences shown on the silver screen. Accordingly, the theaters were powerful catalysts in the formation of new, distinct identities, "highlighting how evolving demands of translation meshed with social transformation in US Chinatowns" (191). Second, through an analysis of how the influential hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan "sampled" (192) dubbed lines from Hong Kong kung fu films, White demonstrates a prominent way these films inspired Black audiences, while also foregrounding the

generative potential of dubbing. Third, he probes the screening of Chinese-language films at southern California universities in the early 1980s, arguing that their English translations helped foster a new academic discipline, that is, Chinese Film Studies, in the United States.

Chapter 11, "The Celluloid Road across the Pacific: Chinese Film Exhibitions in 1920s Honolulu," is concerned with silent film exhibitions and their impact on overseas Chinese audiences but does not address the issue of translation. Drawing on the concept of "educational screen practices" (204), Yoshino Sugawara argues that these commercially unviable screenings served an educational purpose by fostering a connection between overseas Chinese and their evolving homeland in the first half of the twentieth century. Using properly contextualized historical newspaper articles and advertisements, she investigates the key agents who played pivotal roles in orchestrating film exhibitions under the license of the United Exchange Corp., China's first film distribution company. Her conclusion is: Chinese film exhibitions in 1920s Honolulu merged entertainment with cultural and political agendas; fostered transnational connections, and contributed to overseas Chinese identity formation in the modern nation-state era. This well-researched contribution sheds fresh light on the transformative impact of early Chinese cinema on overseas Chinese communities while also enhancing our understanding of the United Exchange's place in the history of the Chinese film industry.

In Chapter 12, "Brief Analysis of Chinese Films within the Film Industry in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay," Yufei Tai Zhang investigates the presence of Chinese cinema in four Latin American countries based on data drawn mainly from the websites of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Focusing on screenings at Chinese film festivals often orchestrated by the Chinese government and films shown in commercial cinemas, she analyzes statistics on the Chinese films exhibited in each national market and information concerning their producers, distributors, and the Chinese cinema's market share. The main findings and conclusions are: Chinese films have a market share of about 1% in the four countries, which presumably applies to Latin America in general; cultural divides and local audiences' viewing habits, among other things, impede their distribution, and when selecting films, commercial distributors take into consideration the international fame of Chinese filmmakers along with the major awards they have won. The chapter includes valuable, though scarce, information on translation: Chinese films shown at local film festivals generally have ready-made Spanish subtitles or dubbings while those commercially exhibited are often translated via English.

*Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation* is a truly remarkable achievement in terms of its coverage, basic research approach, and crucial questions answered. Fully five continents are represented here,

though the bulk of pages are devoted to Europe, the United States, and Asia. A project venturing into largely uncharted territory necessarily leans toward historiography. Properly adopted in the volume, then, is an archive-based approach, presenting “a quantitative overview of the spread of Chinese films in a dozen foreign countries” (6). Revolving around the three key issues previously mentioned, or more specifically, a set of questions that can be encapsulated in a short sentence “*Who distributed or translated what (films), when, where, for whom, why, how, and with what effect?*,” the twelve chapters present the status quo regarding Chinese cinema’s global outreach. The answers given confirm the *Global Times* reporter’s claim that Chinese films are “not competitive with those from the most developed countries” though their international impact has been growing steadily. Also discussed, albeit often not analyzed in depth, are key factors involved such as censorship, ideological conflict, cultural divide, poor distribution networks, and film translation problems.

That said, there is still some room for improvement. First, it is necessary to balance distribution and translation. Translation is “routinely devalued and ignored within screen culture.”<sup>4</sup> Hence the “challenges of studying audiovisual translation history” (168), as it is hard to obtain materials relating to audiovisual translators and their endeavors. Given that transnational filmic exchanges depend on translation, the translator’s work merits serious exploration. Second, there is the need to conduct comparative studies on the distribution of national cinemas. Only by comparing Chinese cinema’s impact in a foreign market with that of its filmic rivals can we gauge its soft power. A third issue involves methodological rigor. As “[n]o one kind or source of evidence is likely to be sufficient (or sufficiently valid) on its own,”<sup>5</sup> so the researcher should, if possible, triangulate data or evidence from various sources to enhance the validity and reliability of findings. This is consciously administered in Chapter 5 only. Last, there are factual errors, grammatical mistakes, and typos to be corrected, for example, *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006) and *Night and Day* (日日夜夜, 2004) are directed by Jia Zhangke and Wang Chao, respectively, not by Zhang Yimou (228); the Chinese title of *The Opium War* (dir. Zheng Junli and Cen Fan, 1959) is *Lin Zexu* 林则徐, not *Yapian Zhanzheng* 鸦片战争 (111).

In the end, this groundbreaking book contributes to the fields of Chinese cinema, the history of Chinese film distribution and translation, Chinese media studies, and audiovisual translation, while promoting transcultural understanding. It is also a valuable reference for industry stakeholders and policy makers. We owe the editors debts of gratitude for launching this formidable project and bringing out an overall impressive book.

## Notes

1. Jin, *Towards a History of Translating Chinese Silent Films*, 1–12.
2. Xia, “How Much Has Chinese Cinema Contributed to China’s Soft Power?”
3. Kuo, “Translation and Distribution of Chinese Films in France,” 237.
4. Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles*, 2.
5. Gillham, *Case Study Research Methods*, 2.

## Funding

This research work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China [Project No. 22BYY013: “Chinese Socio-Translation Studies: Theories and Applications” 中国特色社会翻译学理论建构与实践研究] and the Center for Translation Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies [Project No. CTS202106: “Socio-Translation Studies: Theories and Applications” 社会翻译学理论体系建构与应用研究].

## About the Author

**Baorong Wang** is professor of Translation Studies at Hangzhou Normal University in Hangzhou, China. He earned a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Hong Kong. His main research interests are the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature and culture, the sociological approaches to Translation Studies, audiovisual translation, and translation history. He has published two scholarly books and more than 120 papers in refereed Chinese and international journals.

## Bibliography

- Dwyer, T. *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Gillham, B. *Case Study Research Methods*. London and New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Jin, H. 中国无声电影翻译研究 (1905–1949) [*Towards a History of Translating Chinese Silent Films, 1905–1949*]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013.
- Kuo, M.-C. “Translation and Distribution of Chinese Films in France: A Personal Account.” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12, no. 3 (2018): 237–249.
- Xia, Y. “中国电影, 输出多少软实力?” [“How Much Has Chinese Cinema Contributed to China’s Soft Power?”]. 环球时报 [*Global Times*], May 9, 2013. <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJAqvC>.

Reviewed by Baorong Wang

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5173-8182>

© 2026 The Center for Translation Studies  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2026.2689858>

