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## Translation and Distortion of Linguistic Identities in Sinophone Cinema: Diverging Images of the 'Other

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Translation and dubbing done properly and respectful of local differences have an important role to play in global understanding; we will otherwise end up with a simplified and misleading view of our respective societies.

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# **Translation and Distortion of Linguistic Identities in Sinophone Cinema: Diverging images of the “Other”**

Henry Leperlier

## **Preface**

This study finds its origin in two trips I made to China and Taiwan. During the summer of 2005, I witnessed the following scene when I was browsing the electronics department of a Carrefour Hypermarket in the Beijing suburbs. The screens were showcasing a Rock Music concert. A group of about ten youths stopped to watch the scene as the lead singer spoke to her audience. The unfolding scene was unremarkable, but for the fact that the singer was speaking in Cantonese. The casual onlookers continued to watch the screens intently, paying close attention to the singer’s introduction and the song’s subtitles. The loose group of onlookers watching the screens continued to grow. I was at the centre of the Mandarin-speaking universe but these young people were taking in the Cantonese speech as part of their normal lives. I could speculate that this was perhaps because they had been downloading countless soaps in Cantonese, Korean and Japanese, and Cantonese had thus become a familiar feature of their linguistic environment.

Two years earlier, in July 2003, I found myself in Taipei after an absence of ten years. The MRT’s<sup>1</sup> PA system was announcing the next station, Taipei Central Station. It was in two languages, as in Beijing’s subway; or rather this was the understanding that a casual listener might have drawn. What was unusual was the length of the Chinese language announcements, roughly three times that of the English one, giving tourists and many foreign residents the impression that they were only being told fragmented and reduced information. In fact, the announcements were in four languages: Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese<sup>2</sup>, Hakka and English<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Rapid Transit, the transport system in Taipei.

<sup>2</sup> Taiwanese is part of the Hokkien language also spoken on the mainland around Amoy (Hokkien name, pronounced Xiàmén in Mandarin) in the Fujian province and in Singapore.

These two recurring events, among others, are what prompted me, as a researcher, to question the simplified and “unified” view of Chinese culture and language often portrayed by the western media and travel literature whose aim is to inform their readers about China and the Chinese-speaking world. Whereas the goal of spreading Mandarin Chinese to the Chinese of all linguistic, geographic and ethnic origins has been achieved, the Sinosphere<sup>4</sup> seldom exists in a monolingual environment. With Chinese-language cinema now occupying an increasingly central place in western countries and with Chinese studies more widely offered in European and North American universities, it is relevant to examine how this cultural and linguistic showpiece of Chinese culture is translated or dubbed in other languages, whether in cinemas or on DVDs.

With practically all westerners having little or no knowledge of the Chinese language, and students of the language, even of intermediate level, not being able to understand Mandarin Chinese well enough to fully comprehend Chinese language films, subtitles or dubbing have become the norm when watching Chinese language films distributed outside their original producing countries. It is therefore crucial to examine whether subtitling or dubbing are a true reflection of the linguistic reality lived by native speakers in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the four regions or countries where Mandarin Chinese is an official language.

This chapter will show that this multilingual environment is reflected in Sinophone cinema but that its nature is often concealed or even obliterated by the joint pressures of the marketing distribution system and the legal and state forces at play. I shall then reflect on whether western or, in one case, Chinese, perception of sinophone cinema is a true reflection of its original linguistic and cultural

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Speakers of these three varieties have few difficulties understanding each other. Hokkien is the Chinese language (or dialect, *cf.* note 3) which is the furthest apart from Mandarin; it mainly derives from Classical Chinese, whereas other Chinese languages derive from Middle Chinese.

<sup>3</sup> We will refer to what is sometimes called “Chinese dialects” as Chinese languages, including Taiwanese / Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Shanghainese.

<sup>4</sup> In French, *le monde chinois* or *sinophone*. This includes all areas, countries speaking a Chinese language where Chinese language and culture is at the heart of a country’s or region’s identity; the term coming from the French has gained acceptance as in Shumei Shi’s work: *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, University of California Press, 2007. Sinophone emphasizes the transnational nature of Chinese language cinema.

environment. Finally, I set out to evaluate the consequences, if any, of such linguistic and cultural transposition on foreigners' perception of Chinese culture.

## **The Sinophone world and its linguistic diversity**

To start off, it is, however necessary to map out the linguistic situation of the Sinophone world which tends to be over-simplified when intended for general consumption.

### **China**

The People's Republic of China is officially a multi-cultural society with ethnic groups, including Tibetans and Inner Mongolians. Ethnic minorities constitute 8% of China's population and their languages and cultures are protected by the Chinese Constitution's "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (Order of the President No. 37)" where article 3 states that "The State popularizes Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters," while granting rights to minority languages in article 8 "All the nationalities shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages". Chinese law also states that the spoken and written languages of the ethnic peoples shall be used in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution, the Law on Regional National Autonomy and other laws."<sup>5</sup>

The situation in reality is that the resources to apply these provisions are scarce. Schooling is primarily provided in the majority language, Mandarin, and most media broadcast in Mandarin with ethnic languages relegated to the odd slot—usually inconvenient and rarely watched slots. The difficulties of enforcing the constitutional right to linguistic diversity arise from a lack of resources dedicated to the production of material in the minority languages, and to the fact that most ethnic languages do not use an agreed-upon script. Sometimes new scripts have been developed but material is not being published in them.

Before 1949, only 20 minorities had their own written language. Those in most common use were Mongol, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak, Korean, Xibe, Tai Uzbek, Kirgiz,

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<sup>5</sup> The full version can be consulted online at [http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-9/19/content\\_64906.htm](http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-9/19/content_64906.htm) retrieved September 2010.

Tatar and Russian. Others included Yi, Miao, Naxi, Jingpo, Lisu, Lahu and Wa. Since 1949, the communist government has helped to derive a written script for nine national minorities formerly without one. Still, many minorities are without a written script (Postiglione, 1999: 8). It remains to be seen, however, whether these policies have had a positive effect on schooling in the minority language, as Postiglione stated, “There is a strong call for Chinese as the main medium of instruction. This is being justified by pointing out that there are few scientific materials published in the 56 national minority languages” (*ibid.*). In the public area these languages profit from a high visibility: “The languages of minority groups such as Tibetans, Uighurs and Mongolians are officially recognized and taught in schools. Important documents are translated into major minority tongues and four of them appear on Chinese bank notes.” (*Taipei Times*, December 3, 2004).

One could ask whether this high visibility results in actual everyday use and has helped to give a positive and modern image to ethnic minorities since all-important subjects are still taught through Mandarin and in large cities where Mandarin has become the de-facto lingua franca.

Outside the officially recognized minorities, the Han ethnic group, whose language is Chinese in all its varieties, speak what is referred to as either Chinese dialects or Chinese languages, some of them as different as English from German. There is no official policy on these languages; the above-mentioned law makes no provision for them. Some of these varieties of Chinese are in common everyday use and seem to resist attempts by Central Government officials to replace them with Mandarin Chinese. The most vociferous protests often come from Cantonese speakers in Guangzhou<sup>6</sup>. The latest public protests led to a demonstration in Guangzhou when the local station, GZTV, at the instigation of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Guangzhou Committee proposed to replace most Cantonese programmes with Mandarin language programmes (BBC News, Asia-Pacific, August 2010)<sup>7</sup>. What this brought to light was that Cantonese in China is reinforced by several factors, in particular its official oral status in Hong

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<sup>6</sup> Guangzhou is the capital of the Guangdong province formerly called Canton City and province. This often leads to the misconception that the province of “Canton” is mainly Cantonese speaking. In reality, close to half of the province is Hakka speaking.

<sup>7</sup> Anger at Cantonese language switch. BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10834595>. Retrieved August 2010.

Kong and the existence of a standard script used in some specific domains (comics, erotic novels, or quotes in newspapers, for instance)<sup>8</sup>.

Another example is Shanghainese which is spoken in Shanghai's region and is a part of the Wu group of Chinese languages / dialects. The use of Shanghai can become a symbolic and real-life display of modernism when it is used to produce rap-style music since, as one musician stated, "Compared with Mandarin, [...the] Shanghai dialect is more suitable to be adapted to rap."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, this news item, associating a so-called dialect with a modern form of music, was published on China.org.cn which describes itself as an official site of one the organs of the Central Government<sup>10</sup>. Films are mostly produced in Mandarin and National Minority languages, as will be seen in the discussion of two examples below.

## Taiwan

What used to be called the Republic of China, nowadays still its official name, had, until 1945 a very limited Mandarin Chinese presence. Under the Qing Dynasty's rule, Mandarin's knowledge in Taiwan was limited to a few officials sent from China. In 1895, after the treaty of Shimoneseiki / Maguan (Chinese), Taiwan was handed over to Japan which started a programme promoting Japanese literacy. Its effects were that, at its return to the mainland in 1945, most Taiwanese were bilingual (excluding Aborigines) in Japanese and Taiwanese and sometimes trilingual for Hakka speakers.

Under Martial Law, from 1947, and the rule of the Kuomintang<sup>11</sup> government, from 1945 until 1987 Mandarin was the only language allowed in public life apart

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<sup>8</sup> Cantonese uses Chinese characters, a high percentage of them being different from the ones used in Mandarin Chinese, some Cantonese characters do not exist in Mandarin, others have a different meaning and most of them have a different pronunciation. Cantonese grammar fundamentally differs greatly from Mandarin, to the point that a text written in Cantonese often is incomprehensible to a Mandarin speaker. Some words can be guessed at, often erroneously, but the main body of the text is inaccessible, as for comparison, a Spanish text to a French speaker.

<sup>9</sup> Shanghai Daily, June 15, 2005

<sup>10</sup> "The authorized government portal site to China, China.org.cn is published under the auspices of the State Council Information Office and the China International Publishing Group (CIPG) in Beijing." China.org.cn: [http://www.china.org.cn/2009-09/28/content\\_18620394.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/2009-09/28/content_18620394.htm). Retrieved 19.09.2010.

<sup>11</sup> The Kuomintang / Guomindang 國民黨 lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan in 1949 including soldiers, their families and supporters. It is estimated that close to two million people

from a one-hour broadcast in Taiwanese on all television channels. The end of Martial Law has made possible the use of other languages in the Media and the teaching of Taiwanese, Hakka and aboriginal languages a few hours per week. Taiwan, especially outside large cities, is a diglossic society where more than one language is used by the same people in various settings.

### **Hong Kong**

Since its return to China in 1997 Hong Kong has had a policy of three official oral languages, Cantonese, Mandarin and English, and two official written languages, Mandarin and English. The normal language used in public life, at work and in the media is Cantonese. This said, many Hong Kongers still use another language at home, including Hakka. Two official television channels are in English and one official radio station, RTHK5 Putonghua, broadcasts mainly in Mandarin with the exception of phone-in callers often choosing to speak Mandarin with the presenter answering in Cantonese. Songs can be in Mandarin, Cantonese or English.

### **Singapore**

The island state, which was literally “forced” into independence from Malaysia, comprises a diverse population of Chinese (74.2%), Malay (13.4%) and Indian (9.2%) people (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2009). A continuous campaign by the government to “spread Mandarin,” to entice the ethnic Chinese population to switch from “dialects” to Mandarin has had the result that “Mandarin has increasingly taken over the place of Chinese dialects to become the lingua franca of the Chinese population in Singapore.” (Chua, *Emergence*: 5). The languages spoken most frequently at home for the Ethnic Chinese however are Chinese dialects (30.7%), English (23.9%), Mandarin (45.1%) while 91.6% of ethnic Malays speak Malay at home and, of the Indians, 42.9% use mostly Tamil. As this shows, over the last decade, Singapore has transformed itself into a multi-cultural society whose dominant languages are English and Mandarin Chinese.

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fled to Taiwan. They are called Waishengren 外省人 or “out-of-province people” as opposed to Benshengren 本省人 or “from the province people.” Until recently the rivalry between the two groups was the basis for political loyalty to the Kuomintang (Waishengren) or to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for Benshengren.

## Case studies: Mandarin Chinese policy in films, subtitles and the use of other Chinese Languages in the cinema

### China

From the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese central government realized the importance of the new medium as a tool to promote its policies. In particular, it decided to use the film medium to promote its goal of linguistic unity and favour the spread of Mandarin. At the time a great majority of the Chinese population lived in the countryside where they had little access to radio and television was a rarity. The public showing of films, in the open air, were therefore a regular feature of country life.

Most Chinese films produced at the time were shot with a standard Mandarin track, as Chinese dialects were virtually prohibited. Recently, there has been a relaxation of the rules concerning the shooting and showing of films in various Chinese languages. The recent box office success, *Lust, Caution* 色戒, shot by Taiwanese director Ang Lee 李安, with the work of production companies from four countries<sup>12</sup> has the particularity of having dialogues in Mandarin, Japanese, Cantonese, Shanghainese and English. In this film, whose action takes place during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and whose protagonists play a dangerous game of spies, informers and police interrogators, language choice is far from being innocent. Speaking Cantonese, Mai Taitai, a double agent, is trying to avoid being understood while using a public telephone. Similarly, Shanghainese comes in handy for these characters because it is the language of the lower servants and chauffeurs. Every character's place is conveniently defined by language. *Lust, Caution* is in all probability the first Chinese film, which was freely distributed and shown in its original Mandarin languages, in cinemas and on dvd<sup>13</sup>.

However, in its foreign versions, the subtitles at no time give foreign viewers any indication of the use of these five languages. The cinematographic experience of a Chinese audience is therefore fundamentally different from a western one. The lifting of linguistic censorship enables Chinese audiences to experience Shanghai, to be there and now, as it is. Shanghai has always been a gateway to the rest of the

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<sup>12</sup> United States, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong

<sup>13</sup> 17 minutes of sex scenes were edited out by China's censorship.



world. By using these five languages, the film projects a true reflection of past and present Shanghainese lives. It also helps audiences to identify with characters in a way that a completely Mandarin soundtrack would not have permitted. Japanese agents, speaking their own language, appear as they should and sound out of place in China's Shanghai. Dubbing or English subtitling forces western audiences to rely on other devices to make sense of many of the film's culture-clash situations<sup>14</sup>. The rules that have been applied to the use of various Chinese languages did not and still do not apply to films concerning themselves with official ethnic minorities. However, films depicting life in ethnic minorities, such as *Liu San Jie* 劉三姐, were shot in Mandarin while the songs would include passages in Zhuang<sup>15</sup>. Subtitles in English in its DVD version do not tell the viewer whether the language heard is Mandarin or Zhuang.

*Kekexili* 可可西里 (aka *Mountain Patrol*), a film whose action takes place in contemporary Tibet, is another bilingual film, this time one inspired by true events. Contrary to *Lust, Caution* the audience is immediately introduced to the two languages in the person of a journalist coming to Tibet to investigate the killing of antelopes by poachers. Director Chuan Lu tells the story of organized bands of Tibetans who try to save their people from death and starvation by capturing illegal poachers who are exterminating herds of antelopes on whom many Tibetans depend for food and clothing. The story is told through the eye of the bilingual / bi-ethnic Beijing reporter who can speak some Tibetan and is therefore able to gain the confidence of the militiamen. The use of Tibetan or Mandarin is clearly shown by the characters' own comments when they switch from one language to another and through indications in subtitles.

*Kekexili* is one of the few films mixing Chinese and Tibetan and describing the attitude of Tibetans towards outsiders. The film has not been banned in China and is easily available in DVD format in spite of presenting a complex view of Tibetans who decide to take things into their own hands while trying to adhere as much as

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<sup>14</sup> The BBC usually provides subtitles for hard-of-hearing using different colours according to the language. When it does not have the full text of a language, the viewers are usually told that it is in another language.

<sup>15</sup> Zhuang is the second linguistic group by its population of just under 20 million. Zhuang is a language close to Thai. Its script was using Chinese characters until being recently converted to Latin Characters. It is one of the languages found on all Chinese bank notes. It is however not used extensively in writing.

possible to existing laws. Its style is reminiscent of western movies from the United States while avoiding presenting to the audience a “pure” view of the “natives.” It is a reminder that some reports in the world media, while genuine, might not present a complete picture of the situation in Tibet. Contrary to *Liu San Jie* where the Zhuang language reinforces a passé view of the Zhuang and true expression is in Mandarin, in *Kekexili*, Tibetan is used subversively to present a modern and self-reliant image of Tibetans.

## Taiwan

*A City of Sadness* 悲情城市, when released in 1989 was the first film describing the return of Taiwan to China upon Japan’s capitulation. It also was the first film to depict the 28<sup>th</sup> of February incident and its consequences through the point of view of the members of an upper middle class Taiwanese family. The return of Taiwan to China marked the start of a brutal dictatorship accelerated by the establishment of martial law on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1947. This was the start of the period, which became known later as the period of White Terror. The “incident” which set this course of history in motion took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1947 in Taipei when a woman selling illegal cigarettes had her merchandise and savings confiscated by the Kuomintang controlled Tobacco Monopoly Bureau. Her subsequent killing by Kuomintang government agents prompted the local Taiwanese to rebel and protest against the government and mainlanders who had fled the mainland and established themselves in Taiwan. They occupied government offices for a few weeks in a relatively quiet atmosphere. In retaliation, a few weeks later, the Chinese army, with reinforcements from the mainland, killed tens of thousands of Taiwanese and also many mainlanders.

In the film, this moment in Taiwan’s history is seen through the eyes of a well off family. The movie describes the choices that each one of the family members has to make to adapt to the new situation. The film starts in the home of the Lin family on the day of Japan’s announcement of its capitulation by the Emperor of Japan.

Depending on the audience’s linguistic background, the film can be interpreted or understood in three different ways. Director Hou included inter-titles to supply general historical information. As seen by a non-Chinese speaker, the Lin family is listening to the radio broadcast by the Emperor Japanese announcing Japanese

capitulation while attending to an important event in the Lin's home: the birth of a new baby. One could be tempted to interpret this scene as the continuation of life and Japan's loss balanced by a symbolic birth to herald a new age in Taiwan.

As seen by a Mandarin speaker from outside Taiwan, aware of some historical and cultural elements concerning Taiwan, the Lin Family is trying to listen to the broadcast and the important news that the broadcast is trying to convey. At the same time, the film is devoting most of its attention to the most important event of the day, as far as the Lin household is concerned, the birth of a new child. Mandarin speakers would assume that the broadcast by the Japanese emperor would be understood by all the protagonists, since, after 50 years of Japanese occupation and enforced schooling, all the members of the Lin household would have no difficulty understanding the portent of the Japanese broadcast.

The same scene seen by a Taiwanese speaker would take on an entirely different meaning: at the time of this film's release there were in fact very few Taiwanese (and Japanese), if any, able to understand the Japanese emperor's speech. Throughout each scene the camera remains still and puts the viewer in the position of an invisible participant who has been given a fixed seat in the room. Therefore Taiwanese speakers would receive this speech as being as part of the family, who would be placed in a position of general incomprehension. For it was the first time for Japanese subjects to hear their emperor's voice and that he chose to address them in pure classical Japanese, a language that only trained scholars would comprehend, especially since the language spoken was oral classical Japanese. While knowing that it was the emperor speaking, and aware of the probable nature of the speech, the characters in the film would have the radio switched on mainly because they knew it was announcing an important event but would have completely unable to understand its contents. A traditional Taiwanese speaker viewing the film would be aware of this. On the screen we see the head of the Lin household preoccupied because a baby is about to be born when the camera switches to the bedroom where the birth is taking place. A woman is speaking to the mother and trying to reassure her. They are speaking in Taiwanese. From the second sentence, the Taiwanese audience will know they are speaking in Northern Taiwanese: "Goa ga li gong" (I am telling you), "ga li"

(with/to you) is northern<sup>16</sup>. This will key them into the impact of this historical event on the character in the film.

Significantly, none of this information is relayed by the subtitles, in English or Spanish. Watching this film and understanding the languages spoken by the protagonists plunges the Taiwanese audience very deeply into the lives of the protagonists: The Emperor is addressing them but they are incapable of understanding his speech, they have no choice but to listen to him hoping for the best; the events leading to the end of WWII are too important and if there is the slightest possibility of catching any glimpse of information from the speech, they will seize the opportunity. Their world, living in a Japanese empire, being of Chinese culture and speaking Hokkien Taiwanese leaves them with very few options; they must adapt to the situation, as has been customary in Taiwanese history. They had to adapt to the Qing Dynasty under whose rule they remained until 1895 after having being ruled by the Dutch and the Spanish and blockaded by the French. In 1895, they had to adapt to the Japanese occupation whose stated goal was to transform Taiwan into a model colony. The Lin Family live in the north, closer to centre of the Japanese seat in Taipei, closer also to all of the changes and terrible events coming soon from the Chinese Mainland.

None of these cultural or linguistic elements are visible in any of the subtitled versions, including the one with Mandarin Chinese subtitles. Foreign audiences have to try to make sense of the situation using the intertitles produced by director Hou Hsiao-Hsien where he provides a minimal time line of the historical events relevant to the situation. However, no information is supplied by these explainers as to the Emperor's speech's linguistic oddities or to the import of the language of the protagonists. Foreign audiences will assume that the Taiwanese Chinese speak the same language as their mainland "compatriots" until well into the film when a gathering of worried friends, wondering aloud about whether they will now have to learn Mandarin, the language from the mainland, reveals to the foreigner the linguistic significance of the events taking place on screen—and in history. For, in general foreign audiences assume then that Taiwanese natives always speak Taiwanese and the mainlanders Mandarin. This is again not what will happen in one of the next scenes of the film, where the Shanghainese mafia is coming to replace the

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<sup>16</sup> Southern Taiwanese instead uses "he li."

willing Taiwanese hoodlums and to racketeer local businesses. The subtitles are not able to convey the emotion felt by the Taiwanese that they are being invaded on multiple levels, one of those being of a linguistic nature. Having the invaders speaking a foreign language, Shanghainese, reinforces this feeling of being attacked by foreign sources, as those Shanghainese might be Chinese but they are totally alien to the Taiwanese even after 50 years of Japanese occupation. Ironically, the scene in Shanghainese might be the only one in the film where Taiwanese speakers might not catch on linguistic subtleties. One of the characters speaks very standard Shanghainese giving him instant authority over hoodlums from Shanghai who speak an urban street dialect; another character uses the Suzhou Wu dialect.

## **Hong Kong**

Dubbing Johnny To's *Breaking News* for the mainland market. A similar case in point is the dubbing into Mandarin of To's *Breaking News* for the two hypothetical following reasons: mainlanders might not like to hear films in Cantonese with subtitles and Chinese law, ambiguously, requires Mandarin to be promoted as *the* language of the media. On the Chinese branch of the Amazon on-line store comments from customers asking whether Cantonese films are "really" in Cantonese are not infrequent. These customers do not want to buy dubbed versions and are trying to verify the information provided by the merchant site (see appendix 2). This shows that a significant proportion of Chinese customers would rather see films from Hong Kong with their original soundtrack.

*Breaking News* is about gangsters from the mainland who are surrounded by the police in Hong Kong and decide to break into an apartment and take a local, one-parent family hostage, a father and his two children. Ironically, the leader of the (purported-to-be) mainland gang, Yuen, is played by a well-know Taiwanese actor, Richie Ren, making it difficult for a Chinese-speaking audience to believe wholly in this mainlander gang<sup>17</sup>. The father is portrayed as a weak character accepting every request from the gangsters who themselves clearly show their contempt towards him. He soon lets his computer whizz kid take over, switch on his computer and, at the

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<sup>17</sup> Although the two varieties of Mandarin Chinese from Taiwan and China are mutually easily intelligible, their distinctive accents can be easily and instantly identified. A similar situation to American and British English. The audience probably chooses to believe that Ren's character is from a part of Southern China where Cantonese.

instigation of Yuen, establish a contact on the Internet with the Police Superintendent Rebecca Fong.

The negotiation between Fong and Yuen very quickly turns into a cat and mouse game mixed with intense flirting between the seducing Yuen and the happy to be seduced Rebecca. Added to the intensity of the exchange, where each is mindful not to supply more information than necessary, is that they both decide to talk to the other in their mother tongue (at least in the original version of the film). That police officers speak in Cantonese in Hong Kong is of course part of the natural linguistic set-up. Yuen speaking Mandarin reinforces his image of being an intruder. His presence, emphasized by his use of Mandarin, turns him into the “other” who destroys the normal course of things in Hong Kong, not only because he has kidnapped a family, but also because this reminds the audience of the consequences of being invaded by mainlanders, especially after the return of Hong Kong to the mainland.<sup>18</sup>

The version distributed to the mainland, however, was entirely dubbed into perfectly standard Mandarin and the psychological effect of the mainlander’s identity was conveniently erased. Similarly, the version distributed “abroad” is usually in Cantonese but the subtitles never indicate the change of languages. Interestingly, in this case the experience of the mainlander and that of other foreign audiences may be somewhat similar due to the flat dubbing process. It will only be in Hong Kong that this film’s linguistic cultural significance can be fully felt and experienced by audience members.

## Conclusion

Films, even when they pretend to be a reflection of our world, are not reality. They depict a certain reality, as well all know. Most significantly, this is the reality that the film director wants us to see and experience—even when the audience might have the illusion of a real world, especially in the “cinema vérité” school of cinema. A film is a director’s vision of reality and what the audience sees is what the director decides

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<sup>18</sup> None of the reviewers (in English) on the popular professional film database IMDB realized the language changes, even though they made comments about subtitles. One reviewer even praised the quality (sic) of the subtitles for an Asian movie <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0414931/usercomments>. Retrieved 21 September 2010.

they should see. The audience does not have the option of turning the camera on or off, of moving it in any direction they may desire to. Similarly, the choice of languages used in a film is not just accidental. The languages spoken by characters are the product of a conscious decision made by the director. For commercial reasons, directors might prefer to shoot a film in a standard language with no reference to a more diverse linguistic reality. However, as has been seen here, it is when films are the reflection of a diverse linguistic reality that the audience might start to reflect on the fact that every aspect of the film has a purpose. The use and choice of a language in a movie scene is not fortuitous. The choice of language, apart from its contents, becomes part of an ideological message—and nowhere is this truer than in the culturally diverse parts of Asia discussed earlier.

In the two films, *Breaking News* and *City of Sadness*, language change emphasizes the existence of the “other,” with whom one might have to negotiate, to dialogue and to co-exist. In *City of Sadness* it also provides a third dimension to the complex universe, colony, empire and invasions that the Taiwanese have had to negotiate with in order to survive and to maintain intact their memories and identity. These films also testify to the increasingly fractured nature of Chinese identity on two fronts, both cultural and linguistic: within China and overseas—where a new independent identity has emerged based on Chinese languages but distinct from China’s already fractured identity. In *Breaking News* the two languages emphasize the “other,” similar to the appearance of “Orientalism” as described by Edward Said. The media show the “other” through the description of his culture, emphasizing its alien character, or shocking us with the use of a language outside its normal boundaries to make the audience reject more easily the intrusion of the other.

Translation fulfills an important function, some might say essential, in allowing cultures and languages to communicate and exchange information with each other. This is particularly evident in cinema, which has become a world media and business with films transcending geographical and political boundaries. The subtitling and dubbing of movies seems, with a few exceptions when directors have taken over the translation process, to remain in the hands of producers and distributors who often are more concerned with commercial success than accuracy in translation.

The dubbing or subtitling of films that have been shot in a single language is a straightforward process and should not result in mistranslation or cultural misunderstanding resulting from bad translation when handled by professionals. This used to be the situation until recently when autocratic governments did not facilitate or banned the shooting of films in non-official national languages. The situation has, however, changed drastically in recent years. In Taiwan since the end of martial law in 1987, a great number of movies, if not the majority, include several languages and reflect the diversity of Taiwanese society. In China with the relaxation of rules or controls over languages in cinema, a growing number of movies either use different Mandarin dialects, Chinese languages or other ethnic languages. This diversity is not visible in subtitles nor heard when these films are dubbed. Sinophone societies seem to have reached a point where the imposition of only one standard language imposed on everybody is no longer the absolute norm. Their societies have changed and are allowing a greater diversity, putting a limit on the “mandarinization” of their citizens. Cinema, not only in China and Taiwan, but also in Hong Kong and Singapore, are now reflecting a greater tolerance of cultural and linguistic diversity. It is providing audiences with a more realistic, linguistic and cultural, representation of their multiple identities.

In today’s globalized market, these films are being increasingly exported; often, multilingual movies deal with more complex societal issues and catch the interest of a foreign audience interested in having an open door, one might say multiple doors, into another society. The nearly complete lack of a system enabling such an audience to be made aware of the complex multilingual and multilingual characters in such movies ends up providing a distorted and simplified view of Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Singaporean societies as reflected in its cinemas. It would be wise to avoid the appearance of a new orientalism representing the cultural fabric of these countries as exotic objects with only mandarin at the centre, barring a few ethnic “visible” minorities, societies.

Solutions are available. The BBC in its subtitling uses different colors; some film directors have requested the inclusion of language references in subtitling or use italics to denote a different language. These solutions, however imperfect, do alert the audience to the multilingual character of a film without disturbing their watching pleasure. Dubbing is more problematic, the BBC and some other television stations,



often use dubbing with a slight foreign accent to reflect such language differences; it is a delicate matter where some viewers might be led to believe that only some languages should be “awarded” perfect dubbing and that some nationalities might be incapable of speaking English as well as a native speaker. Dubbing with a foreign accent might be misunderstood as condescending. Dubbing the main language while subtitling for other secondary languages is another solution that has been tried, especially in war movies, for example in American movies taking place in Germany where all Germans speak perfect American English and other nationalities keep their own languages to differentiate them from the Germans. Audiences are ready to suspend disbelief for action movies. In an Asian context where audiences are often unaware of linguistic contexts they are not offered choices or are not aware that there could be choices.

Translation and dubbing done properly and respectful of local differences have an important role to play in global understanding; we will otherwise end up with a simplified and misleading view of our respective societies.

## Appendix 1

1. Taipei Times. December 3, 2004

### CHINA: Beijing struggles to make a polyglot nation conform

*Children's cartoon caught up in the long-running debate about how to maintain national cohesion amid diversity of languages*

Taipei Times

Friday, December 3, 2004

This article can be found on the web at

<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=17693>

## Appendix 2

Sample of comments by Amazon (China) dissatisfied customers about dubbed Cantonese films: notice in both comments the exclamation marks left by customers to express surprise of dissatisfaction. The blue colour is the title of the comment. The comment comes after the name / pseudonym of the customer and the publication date.

1. 9 July 2007 Screenshot

用户评论(共3条评论) [我要写评论](#)



不能不说广东话! ★★★ 2/2 人认为此评论有帮助

作者: nuo1127\*\*\*\*\* 2007-07-09发表

这部电影还不错，惨在现在只有国语，有广东话的时候还得买一次！

这条评论对您有帮助吗？  是  否 0条回应 [回应此评论](#) [举报](#)

**Translation:** (from the second line in blue):

“It’s not possible that it’s not in Cantonese!”

(...)

“This movie is very good, what a pity it’s only in Mandarin. When it comes out in Cantonese, I’ll have to buy it again.”

2. 13 September 2007 screenshot

我要提问

用户评论(共1条评论) [我要写评论](#)



**信息不准确!** ★ 1/1 人认为此评论有帮助

作者: [ningsishi\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*](#) 2007-09-13发表

这张DVD根本就没有粤语原音，卓越发布的信息不准确。

这条评论对您有帮助吗？  是  否 0条回应 [回应此评论](#) [举报](#)

**Translation:**

“The information is not accurate!” (title)

“ This DVD in fact has no Cantonese sound track. Amazon published information is not accurate.”

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## List of Films

- A City of Sadness* 悲情城市, 1989, Dir. Hou Hsiao-Hsien
- Breaking News* 大事件 (aka *Dai Si Gin*), 2002, Dir. Johnnie To
- Kekexili* 可可西里 (aka *Mountain Patrol*), 2004, Dir. Lu Chuan
- Liu San Jie* 劉三姐 (aka *Third Sister Liu*), 1961, Dir. Su Li
- Lust, Caution* 色·戒 (aka *Love, Caution*), 2007, Dir. Ang Lee