

Subtitling Chinese Humour: the English Version of *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009)

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Abstract

Zhang Yimou is one of the most critically acclaimed Chinese film directors and he has touched upon a wide range of themes in his more than two decades of film directing. In 2009, his *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (or Zhang's Blood Simple) was a new experiment and adventure. Adapted from the Coen brothers' directorial debut, this film stands out as a dark film noir as well as a comedy. Humour is one of the most dominant features of this film. Subtitling the humour is considered challenging and thus multiple humorous conversations are deleted in the English version. Explication is a strategy frequently resorted to in the humour subtitling of this film. However, the humorous effect is not satisfactorily reproduced or is weakened or even eliminated in the English version given that certain weak subtitles are provided. Apart from verbal humour created with language, non-verbal humour is prominent in this screwball and slapstick comedy and mise-en-scene is very well applied to convey the visual jokes. This paper will discuss explication as a primary strategy in subtitling, with a focus on omitted scenes, and will investigate non-verbal humour with two aspects of mise-en-scene.

Key words: *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop*, humour, explication, omitted scenes, mise-en-scene.

Introduction

In mainland China, an increasing number of films are produced each year. According to statistics from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), in 2011, 558 melodramas and overall 791 films were made in the People's Republic of China; in 2012, 745 melodramas alone were produced (Li & Li, 2013). In regard to film quantity, Chinese film production is globally third, only behind the US and India. Whenever Chinese films are screened in a foreign land, it is necessary to translate them into the language commonly spoken or understood in the land in question, dubbed or subtitled. In terms of subtitling, audiences' complaints about confusing, unintelligible or erroneous subtitles are not to be disregarded. Besides, particular subtitles or complete scenes may be omitted from the subtitled films. The renowned Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou has been exploring films of a wide range of themes and genres, including melodrama, martial arts (*wuxia*) and historical war films, and his films have been critically acclaimed around the world. Zhang's 2009 film *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (or Zhang's *Blood Simple*), as his first attempt to combine a comedy with suspense, might be distinguished from his previous artistic and thought-provoking films. Owing to the specificities of humour in this film, subtitling is a challenging task and several conversations end up missing in the English version. On the other hand, particular translation strategies like *explicitation* are frequently and necessarily used. Interestingly, this film, adapted from the Coen brother's directorial debut *Blood Simple* (1984) stands out as a hilarious screwball comedy as well as a film noir. The humorous elements are fully embedded throughout the film and refer to Chinese popular culture, such as song-and-dance duet (a traditional Chinese folk art). Comedy as it is, almost half of the film is comprised of physical humour rather than funny utterances, which reveals that non-verbally expressed humour contributes significantly to the entire humorous situations.

Non-verbally expressed humour is closely related to song-and-dance duet culture, and the hilarious cues are very familiar to Chinese audiences. However, for Western audiences who are familiar with Zhang's art film pedigree and *Blood Simple*'s (1984) art-house sensibility, the adaptation may be baffling regarding the use of slapstick. As Maggie Lee (2010) puts it, 'their specific cultural references and the cast's screeningly noisy acting style are what eventually wear out non-Chinese viewers' (para. 8). The difficulty for Western viewers to read the film's sensibility also allegedly caused the unsatisfactory reception and low distribution of this film in foreign countries. Still, humour created by slapstick tricks and other non-verbal gags are inclined to be universal and understandable to foreign audiences in general. Nevertheless, verbal humour relies on language transfer to be appreciated in another country in another language. By concentrating on both verbal and non-verbal humour, this paper will investigate humour, with a focus on omitted humorous conversations in the target language (TL) version as well as *mise-en-scene* in the presentation of non-verbal humour.

Background

'Subtitling humour requires insight and creativity, but it is also a matter of establishing priorities' (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 214). Humour appears at various levels and can derive from the interaction between word and image, or a play on words, or become an inseparable part of a storyline (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, pp. 214-215). Some lines will thus be easier to translate than others. While the importance of different lines can vary too and it is important to understand to what extent humour is part of the texture of the film.

In regard to dialects in humour, Arampatzis (2012) approaches dialects at the service of humour with American sitcoms as a case study. As Mayoral Asensio (as cited in Arampatzis, 2012) puts it, humour in terms of translation is presented as codified (user/use) or non-codified (comment) (p.72). Arampatzis (2012) also introduces five strategies of translating dark humour

with a dialect: *levelling* or *standardisation*, *conservation* of dialect, *paralinguistic compensation*, *explicitation* and *generalisation* (p.73). In terms of *dark humour*, Bucaria (2008) bases her research on Delabastita (1989), Gottlieb (2005) and Chiaro (1992), and she analysed dubbing dark humour in audiovisual translation by categorising dark humour, on the basis of ‘verbal/non-verbal’ and ‘visual/acoustic’ divisions. Bucaria also demonstrates the most commonly used strategies of subtitling dark humour, which are: *close rendering*; *complete omission*; *weakening*; and *increased effect*.

This paper will adopt verbal/non-verbal divisions in the study of the humour in Zhang Yimou’s *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009). It will respectively look into how verbal humour is transferred by English subtitles with primarily the *explicitation* strategy that Arampatzis has discussed or by Bucaria’s *complete omission* and how non-verbal humour is portrayed by *mise-en-scene*.

The study

This study is to examine existing subtitles of *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009) and discover translation strategies adopted. The version of DVD that provides all English subtitles in this research is distributed by Momentum Pictures and authorised by Beijing New Picture Film Co., Ltd. and Film Partner (2009) International, Inc. Although excellent subtitles convey both meaning and effect, particular subtitles contain minor errors or are subject to discussion.

Explicitation and analysis

Explicitation is one of the most frequently and necessarily used strategies with regard to subtitling the film in question. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), *explicitation* is a term adopted to describe a phenomenon where the target text explicates the original in a more intelligible way, usually by adding explanatory words or including connectives. Therefore, the natural logical flow of a text and readability are both enhanced. As a matter of fact, films are more often than not composed of utterances located in contexts which original language audiences can easily recognise and grasp. By contrast, TL audiences may neglect or not be able to interpret significant contextual details, which hinders their understanding. Hence, it is essential to render particular phrases in subtitles more explicit. Hervey and Higgins (1992) also use the term *exegetic translation* to define explicit translation where extra details are added and the source text is expanded and explicated (p. 250). When a subtitle contains culture-dependent references whose equivalents are absent in the TL culture, the subtitler has to include additional explanation for the sake of TL audiences, especially as references often have an influence on interpretation. Nonetheless, lengthy explanations are not allowed and intricacies of cultural-bound and other terms cannot be explained with only one or two more phrases. In this case, another strategy, *condensation*, is critical. To produce subtitles with acceptable lengths, condensing information is crucial. *Condensation* and *reformulation* often go hand in hand and how to rephrase largely depends on TL norms (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 150). Below are several examples of explicitation found in Zhang’s *Blood Simple*. Dialogue lines have been taken from the film together with the subtitled translations and will be explored in regard to how the dialogue lines have been translated, specifically the significance of the translated information as well as what is lost in translation.

The boss’ wife buys a gun from a Persian businessman, when guns were still rare in northwest China at that time, and she is very pleased with her ‘high-tech product’:

Table 1

00: 03: 53

Source language (SL)	我也能雷倒众生了
Pinyin spelling (PS)	<i>Wo ye neng lei dao zhongsheng le</i>
Target language (TL)	Everyone will be amazed.

‘雷’ (*lei*) in Chinese, although often used for the natural phenomenon of thunderstorms, or as a surname, has gained a new meaning in recent years. It started from a network usage, indicating a speech or action that makes others wordless or helpless, or shocks or scares others (‘Baidu Baike,’ n.d.). In this context, other people would unquestionably be shocked and scared to see the unusual weapon. The English word ‘thunderstorm’ does not have this connotation, but the meaning is roughly conveyed by ‘amaze’. ‘Amaze’ explicates the surprise and fright that the gun may potentially create on people and *explicitation* is used because of the non-existence of a similar usage of the TL word. The new meaning of 雷 became popular only a few years ago, and thus it produces an amusing effect in this ancient background with a logical conflict. This humour is lost owing to the difficulty of finding an equivalent usage.

Noodle shop helpers Zhao and Chen are secretly approaching their boss Wang’s safe to steal money, as they have not been paid for long:

Table 2

01: 01: 07

SL	投石问路 打草惊蛇
PS	<i>Toushi wenlu, dacao jingshe</i>
TL	I'm just trying to see if he's in there.

When Zhao and Chen sneak to the backyard to steal money from their boss Wang’s safe, Zhao has this utterance. ‘投石问路’ (*toushi wenlu*) is what one says when going out to investigate an action, one tosses a rock on the way to see if anybody is around. ‘打草惊蛇’ (*dacao jingshe*) is a saying which originally means *one hits grass and alerts a snake in it*, implying that one wants to punish someone but alert others. This idiom is often applied to connote the way of handling a problem that is not cautious enough, and so alarms the enemy instead. So a literal translation of *toushi wenlu, dacao jingshe* is ‘I’ll toss a rock to see if he’s there, hit the grass and alert a snake in it.’ Both idioms, supposed to be applied in a literary situation, indirectly display how Zhao tries to find out if Wang is in, which produces a slightly humoristic effect. Zabalbeascoa (1996) argues that if a joke centres on an institution or culture-related reference that is not in the TL audiences’ knowledge, *adaptation* is needed or humour may disappear (p. 252). *Omission* rather than *adaptation* is resorted to in this English subtitle. The origins of the two Chinese idioms are omitted, giving priority to audiences’ interpretation and sacrificing an idiom-based minor humour. We might also say the meaning of the source line is *explicitated*.

As Zhao knows how to find out if Wang is in without making Wang suspicious, Chen says that Zhao is very experienced and Zhao replies to her:

Table 3

01: 01: 13

SL	别夸我 我也是摸索着前进
PS	<i>Bie kua wo, wo ye shi mosuo zhe qianjin</i>
TL	Don't flatter me. I'm still new to this.

The literal subtitle may be ‘Don’t flatter me. I’m also trying to feel my way.’ ‘摸索着前进’ (*mosuo zhe qianjin*), literally meaning ‘to feel the way and proceed’, is a term that describes a situation where a new policy is put into practice and people need to discover the unknown way ahead due to the lack of models to follow. 摸索着前进 originally was used to describe the situation of the newly established People’s Republic of China when the Communist Party of China was leading our nation to rebuild our country under a socialist system. As no country had built socialism right after feudalism or semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism, China had almost no model to follow and scarce lessons to learn, but tried hard to blaze its own trail. Thus, this Chinese phrase has connotations of a cultural reference specific to a time period which can hardly be retained in English translations. The subtitler has chosen to overtly reveal that Zhao is ‘still new to stealing’. If the English subtitle is ‘feel my way’, Zhao and Chen seem to be simply walking in the darkness. Therefore, again the subtitler turns to *explicitation* to explicitly show English-speaking audiences Zhao’s inexperience in this illegal ‘undertaking’.

Weak subtitles

In ‘Dubbing Dark Humour: A Case Study in Audiovisual Translation’, Bucaria (2008) introduces her categorisations of verbal dark humour: purely-linguistic, culture-specific, linguistic and culture-specific and non-specifically verbally expressed humour (p. 222). ‘The category of ‘verbal dark humour’ comprises cases in which humour is mainly expressed through the verbal channel’ (Bucaria, 2008, p. 222).

Examples of purely linguistic dark humour are found when the humorous lines are based on linguistic devices such as wordplay, alliteration, homophony, and paronymy. [...] Culture-specific dark humour includes lines and jokes characterised by more or less explicit allusions to culture-specific SL elements, such as institutions, famous characters, food, personalities, etc., used for humorous effect. (Bucaria, 2008, p. 223)

Purely linguistic and culture-specific humour can overlap in particular situations and thus linguistic and culture-specific humour exists. The following part refers to examples of linguistic or culture-specific humorous English subtitles from Zhang’s *Blood Simple* that have been evidently weakened.

Zhao makes such a remark to Chen after the boss’ wife buys a gun from a Persian businessman:

Table 4

00: 05: 40 – 00: 05: 42

SL	你说这老板娘 寻过死 还上过吊 今天差点还买炮
PS	<i>Ni shuo zhe laobanniang, xun guo si, hai shang guo diao, jintian chadian hai mai pao</i>
TL	The boss’ wife has always been a piece of work. And today she bought a gun.

Literally, the subtitle could be ‘the boss’ wife has attempted to kill herself, to hang herself. Today she nearly bought a cannon.’ The verbally expressed dark humour about suicide and death is apparently lost in the English subtitle. Nida and Taber (1969) define *communication load* to describe ‘the degree of difficulty of a message’, which is ‘the ratio between the number of units of information and the number of formal units (i.e. words)’ (p. 198). Communication load refers not only to semantic but also to formal elements, which implies that optimally the target language text should be able to continue the form of the original language text, which enhances the difficulty in the case of subtitling. On the one hand in this subtitle, informational elements are the boss’ wife’s attempts to kill herself, and she almost buys the cannon. This is roughly similar to the English subtitle – she has been a piece of work and bought a gun. However, the Chinese line creates a humorous effect due to the rhyme between ‘吊’ (*diao*) (to hang oneself) and ‘炮’ (*pao*) (cannon) which is a significant formal humorous factor. Unfortunately, the English subtitle only retains the semantic information but not the formal element. According to Nida and Taber (1969), *dynamic equivalence* characterises a translation in which ‘the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors’ (p. 200). Regarding this subtitle, if the formal and humorous effect is lost, the English subtitle is utterly against *dynamic equivalence*, as receptor language audiences will probably not laugh by reading the English version. Moreover, *gist translation* may be able to illustrate this subtitling. As Hervey and Higgins (1992) depict, *gist translation* is a translation that condenses information in the source text and is a ‘synopsis’ of the original (p. 250). The English subtitle deletes the fact that she has been attempting to hang herself and alters it into ‘a piece of work’.

Li is frightened by the thought of people gossiping about his affair with the boss’ wife which will impose a heavy pressure on them and negatively affect their reputation, but she does not seem to care:

Table 5
00: 13: 13

SL	走自己的路 让他们吐去吧
PS	<i>Zou ziji de lu, rang tamen tu qu ba</i>
TL	It's our life. Let others talk.

This sentence, originally translated from Alghieri Dante’s ‘*Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti*’, or ‘Follow your own road/course, and let the people talk’ in English, is frequently but funnily quoted by Chinese in daily life as ‘走自己的路，让别人说去吧’, to emphasise that ‘I will do whatever I want and ignore other people’s comment’. In this subtitle, the Chinese version of this renowned saying is literally adapted into ‘Follow your own road/course, and let the people *spit*.’ Occasionally, ‘gossip’ is expressed by the colloquial phrase that means ‘to spit’ in Chinese, which is the case of this subtitle. The reason why the translator has not used the more commonly used translation but opted *gist translation* may be that either she was not aware of Dante as the initiator or that she explicates the meaning since Dante’s saying will not cause foreign audiences to laugh anyway.

The boss Wang discovers his wife’s affair and violently abuses her. She resents that Li only stands by and says:

Table 6

00: 21: 17- 00: 21: 20

SL	你绝对是南坡第一窝囊废 正宗的南坡腕
PS	<i>Ni juehui shi nan po di yi wonangfei, zhengzong de nan po wan</i>
TL	You are such a wimp, the biggest I've ever seen.

‘窝囊废’ (*wonangfei*) is a wimp and ‘南坡第一窝囊废’ (*nan po di yi wonangfei*) is the biggest wimp in South Slope (a made-up place name). It is condensed into ‘南坡腕’ (*nan po wan*), which is an interlingual homophone of ‘number one’, as ‘腕’ (*wan*) bears a similar pronunciation to ‘one’. That explains why the English subtitle is ‘the biggest I’ve ever seen’. In fact, the film presumably targets young Chinese audiences to whom popular culture is an important and familiar part of life and most of them learn English and understand the phrase ‘number one’ and will laugh at the unexpected linguistic cue. Delabastita (1996) investigates wordplay that involves two (or more) linguistic structures with similar forms and slightly different meanings (p. 128). Homophones, those with different writings but identical pronunciation, are one of the most common types of wordplay (Delabastita, 1996). Although ‘南坡腕’ (*nan po wan*) and ‘number one’ are not strictly homophones, they bear resemblance in pronunciation interlingually and this phenomenon creates a humoristic effect. Li is scared by his boss Wang and refuses to return to the shop with the boss’ wife, and she is extremely disappointed and heart-broken:

Table 7

00: 21: 50

SL	哪知道是个假肢 还是个次品
PS	<i>Na zhidao shi ge jiazhi, hai shi ge cipin</i>
TL	But I was wrong about you.

In the preceding translation, the boss’ wife says ‘I was wrong about you,’ but in the original Chinese, she makes reference to his having ‘fake shoulders’. She thinks she has found a reliable man, one with strong shoulders to lean against, as is often said in Chinese. Nonetheless, what she finds is a wimp, an ‘artificial limb’ or fake shoulders, to quote from the original. Not only is he an ‘artificial limb’, the artificial limb has ‘defects’, as is manifested by ‘次品’ (*cipin*). The ‘prop’ in the culture-related situation – an artificial limb, is entirely omitted and only the fact is retained that he is not a strong man that she can trust. The metaphor between an artificial limb and a coward is also novel and ambiguous for Chinese audiences, so the ambiguity might not need to be omitted in the translation.

The helper Zhao drags the other helper Chen to steal money from their boss’ safe and Chen reluctantly says:

Table 8

00: 35: 20 – 00: 35: 22

SL	什么人跟你这么走下去 那不就犯罪深渊吗?
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PS	<i>Shenme ren gen ni zheme zou xia qu, na bu jiu shi fazui shenyuan ma?</i>
TL	If I dare follow you, that would make me a criminal.

This is a translation through explicitation. A literal translation of the original is ‘who dares to follow you could ever escape the abyss of crime?’ The original rhetorical question has a confirmed answer: one will undoubtedly fall into the abyss of crime and receive harsh punishment if insisting on illegal adventure. However, ‘abyss of crime’, another culture-based metaphor, is a modern Chinese usage for the outcome of continual wrongdoings and life in jail, while the setting of this film is ancient China. Humour is found in such use of a contemporary idiom in the ancient setting. Attardo’s (2002) development of *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) identifies *Situation* as an event or a situation where a joke occurs. The English subtitle simplifies the ‘logical inconsistency’ and hides the humour.

Omitted scenes

In the English version, about ten major humorous conversations are omitted. One of the most outstanding conversations is a debate between Zhao and Chen over whether or not to open Wang’s safe to take their long-awaited salary while he is away, the debate is as follows:

Chen: 让人知道不被人笑掉大牙？

Zhao: 笑掉就笑掉呗 我管它那个呢？

Chen: 有的人那大牙呀 鬼斧神工的 那也笑不掉 就得被撬掉

Zhao: 陈七请注意 你的钱放在桌子上 你走过去把它拿起来 放在自己兜子里 这能算偷吗？ 请回答

Chen: 赵六请注意 你是在偷换概念 钱放在钱柜里 而且是放在带有密码锁的别人的钱柜里 和放在桌子上意义是完全不同的 回答完毕

Zhao: 陈七请注意 你要认识到问题的主体 主体是什么 钱 你得知道钱的主人是谁 不是它在哪里 不管它在哪里 它都要回到主人身边 这叫什么 物归原主 落叶归根 回答完毕

Chen: 赵六请注意 我认为你这种是自私 完全没有社会感的行为 严重点说 你是缺乏基本道德人格的行为 你忘记钱所在的环境 请问你 东西落在别人家 你会在他家没有人的情况下 撬门砸锁把东西取出来吗？ 回答完毕

Zhao: 陈七请注意 你忽略了或者故意含糊了这个问题的另一个关键因素 是我的东西落在别人家了 我的确不应该在人家不知情的情况下 把我的东西拿回来 但我多次提出要回我的东西 他不给我 态度很生硬 有时还挺横 我该怎么办 只能智取 也就这么跟你说吧 我的钱被绑架了 谈判以后没有结果 我只能采取强制性的手段进行解救 回答完毕

Chen: 赵六请注意 我认为你这种比喻依然是不恰当的 甚至是言过其实的 人质被绑架了 面临生命危险 有可能被撕票 但钱是不会的 你是在粉饰你的恶劣行径 回答完毕

Zhao: 陈七请注意 你可以藐视我的行为 但是你能想出更好的办法解救我的工钱吗？ 回答

Chen: 我不回答 此处可以插播广告 不要回来 马上离开

Zhao: 我不离开

This debate involves Chinese law and logical thinking of materialist philosophy, like antagonistic contradiction and dialectical materialism, which are relatively obscure to Western viewers. If subtitled, the unfamiliar elements will need evident explanation and wordy notes may be needed; yet, particular details are subject to omission because of temporal-spatial constraints. If the meaning conveyed by a particular word or expression is not significant enough to the development of a text to justify sidetracking the receptor with lengthy explications, translators can and often do simply omit translating the items in question (Baker, 1992, p.40). Indeed, the debate is not vital enough for the plot, as the two people concerned approach the safe later. The fact is also that none of the stars in the current film are of international appeal, and thus omitting or editing out the whole scene is justified by the case that story development is not hindered. Nonetheless, the debate is crucially linked to the humour creation of the film and performers are known in the Chinese entertainment industries for their verbal dexterity. Also, the subtitler may subjectively reckon that editing out the scene reduces the target audiences' reading pressure, rather than taking account of sacrificing a considerable amount of the film's humour. One way to tackle subtitling in this debate is to simplify the information for the sake of English speakers and omit new knowledge that does not affect the overall interpretation. Despite the risk that target viewers may still feel puzzled, subtitling the scene reveals more fidelity and respect to the effort of creating the original humour.

Below is one of the arguments Chen makes in this debate and is literally translated into English by myself:

Table 9

SL	<p>赵六请注意 我认为你这种是自私 完全没有社会感的行为</p> <p>严重点儿说 你是缺乏基本道德人格的行为 你忘记钱所在的环境</p> <p>请问你 东西落在别人家 你会在他家没有人的情况下 撬门砸锁把东西取出来吗?</p> <p>回答完毕</p>
PS	<p><i>Zhao liu qing zhuyi, wo renwei ni zhe zhong shi zisi, wanquan meiyou shehuigan de xingwei</i></p> <p><i>Yanzhong dian'er shuo, ni shi quefa jiben daode rengen de xingwei, ni wangji qian suo zai de huanjing</i></p> <p><i>Qingwen ni, dongxi la zai bierenjia, ni hui zai ta jia meiyou ren de qingkuang xia, qiaomen zasuo ba dongxi qu chulai ma?</i></p>
TL	<p>Look Zhao. I believe you're very selfish with no sense of society.</p> <p>You lack basic morality and ignore where the money is.</p> <p>If you leave something at others' home, will you break in to take it when they're away?</p>

This argument refers to ‘社会感’ (*shehuigan*), meaning *sense of society*, in relation to China’s promoting altruism and responsibility towards society throughout history. Stealing is evidently a selfish behaviour, to say the least. ‘基本道德人格’ (*jiben daode renge*) is literally *basic moral personality* and refers to the most basic moral standards that people have to meet. These are cultural references and also Chinese moral teaching idioms that frequently occur to Chinese viewers, yet are possibly not often mentioned in other countries. Again, a *sense of society* and *basic moral personality* are modern expressions, and when used in this ancient background, they generate an amusing effect.

Another hilarious scene omitted in the English version is when the chief police officer enters the noodle shop to investigate about the cannon. Four criminals have been arrested and shoved into the shop and Li, the lover of the boss’ wife is ordered by the chief to tell the names of the objects tied on one of the criminals’ shackle. The objects on the shackle are a significant wordplay, which are ‘砖’ (*zhuan*, a brick), ‘镐’ (*gao*, a pickaxe) and ‘破鞋’ (*poxie*, a worn shoe). The ideograms placed together, ‘砖镐破鞋’ (*zhuan gao poxie*), has the same pronunciation as ‘专搞破鞋’ (*zhuan gao poxie*) which means ‘always adulterous’. This scene, as far as I can observe, is omitted partly due to the low-brow amusing situation, as their crime is ‘adultery’ and will receive harsh punishment for it. The reason is as the chief says, ‘our work has been focused on catching infidelity.’ Their exaggerated attention to infidelity is humorous for Chinese viewers, whereas Western audiences may feel bewildered by overreacting to an immoral behaviour. The absence of such a linguistic and culture-related wordplay in English is called a ‘void’. A ‘void’ is defined by Dagut (1978) as ‘the non-existence in one language of a one-word equivalent for a designatory term found in another’ (as cited in Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p. 196). What have also disappeared in the English version are the brutal ancient Chinese punishments for the criminals.

Non-verbal humour study

Information does not completely depend on words to be perceived; likewise, humour can be generated without language. Verbal and non-verbal humour both contribute to the amusing effect of *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009). Instead of involving humorous dialogues or monologues, non-verbal humour does not take advantage of language, but rather *mise-en-scene*, which ‘signifies the director’s control over what appears in the film frame’ (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 176). Aspects of *mise-en-scene* include setting, costume, lighting and film figures’ behaviours (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 176).

As *mise-en-scene* can exceed normal conceptions of realism (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p.177), a director is enabled to portray non-verbal humour through ‘unrealistic’ *mise-en-scene*. Costumes and makeup in this film are intentionally designed to be ‘abnormal’, as is observed in an interview of Mao Mao who plays the role of the noodle shop helper Chen (“The costume design and makeup of *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop*,” 2009). The colour of all the costumes is flamboyant, either in the boss’ wife’s emerald gown or Li’s bright pink top and trousers. The strong clash between the colours creates a colourful impression on screen. More importantly, the gaudy colours display the provincial and folk features of the characters, which is consistent with other folk feature presentations in the film, including a dramatized noodle making process. For instance, this film along with costume style highlights a folk art in China – song-and-dance duet. The duet originated from northeast China, dating back to 5,000 years ago, and is now a nationwide renowned form of art (Yuan & Li, 2011, p. 62). It involves an actor and an actress in very bright outfits. The actress plays the role of ‘旦’ (*dan*), a lady, and the actor plays ‘丑’ (*chou*), a clown or the funny part. While the lady’s costume is gaudily pretty, the clown’s outfit design appears exuberant but amusing (Yuan & Li, 2011, p. 63). Male

characters in this film can all be categorised as ‘clowns’ and thus are dressed ‘bizarrely-looking’. Moreover, Zhao’s enormous front teeth are an aspect of the character’s makeup, sardonically mocked by the chief police officer as a sign of premature aging, since people count livestock’s teeth to tell their age; yet this moment is omitted in the English version.

‘Since the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘slapstick’ has been our name for popular, rather than literary, low physical comedy (Dale, 2000, p. 1).’ Editing, gestures and facial expressions of the actors all can convey visual jokes, and common suspense set-up enable viewers to interpret more than the characters at times (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 227). *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is a low physical comedy, either for the bright-coloured and ‘not-very-good taste’ outfits or narratively through the process of catching infidelity as the central task of the police. Furthermore, slapstick elements make crucial contribution to non-verbal humour. With regard to this film, Zhao the helper might have the most slapstick acting, for example, in the sequence where he drags his love interest Chen to trespass into Wang’s backyard in order to take their salary that has not been paid for long. While entering Wang’s room, the couple are tremendously scared, fearing that Wang may by chance be already back from his trip. To test if he has returned or not, Zhao says greetings and pretends to chat to an invisible Wang, but no response is received. Chen, then, similarly attempts to notify Wang, and bursts out the most impressive and identifiable laugh, a laugh well known to Chinese audiences as an aspect of the actress’ brand. Extremely frightened, Zhao slips down and falls onto the ground, and reprimands her for repeating what he has just done. Unlike the previously discussed debate, this scene has not been removed in the English release, probably because the characters’ utterances are fairly simple to translate. What has created more apparent humour in such a scene is their slapstick acting, and the visual humour itself can be well perceived by foreign audiences even if dialogue lines are not comic. Another humorous acting scene involves the boss’ wife and all the helpers in the noodle shop where a Persian businessman attempts to sell the wife a cannon. Lifting the cloth on top, he unveils the ‘high-tech’ weapon to everyone. Surprisingly, a Persian beauty is sitting on it and as she descends, enthusiastic music is played and she begins an appealing belly dance. People in the noodle shop, possessed by the strong music, start moving along to the beat. The businessman, satisfied with his ‘magic’, waves to stop the music and the dancer withdraws from the film frame. The boss’ wife and others suddenly come back to reality and become very embarrassed for their inappropriate behaviour. This scene performs excellently at the service of non-verbal humour. Certain universality exists in gestures and mime, as is shown in the success of *Mr Bean* (1990-1995) (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 227).

Nonetheless, this scene is edited out in the English release of Momentum Pictures that this study has employed, the reason for which is predicted that the intrusive belly dance is not inextricably significant to the plot but would look absurd and low-brow to foreign audiences. It also possibly slows down the smooth pace of the film and interrupts the storyline.

Conclusion

This study concentrates on the humour in Zhang Yimou’s film *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009) since humour is not one of the major features of Zhang’s films overall and it is thus distinct from his other films. More importantly, this film is adapted from a film as dark as *Blood Simple* (1984), with humour produced both verbally and non-verbally. Verbally speaking, humorous subtitles are frequently transferred into English with the aid of explicitation, aiming at rendering the meaning more explicit. That causes a loss of amusing implication and possibly renders the original humoristic intention mundane. For another thing, certain subtitles are unsatisfactory, either for the trouble of recreating an interlingual

homophone or for the utter disappearance of culture-based metaphors. Another disadvantage for English-speaking audiences is that omission has led to weakened humoristic effect several times, especially for scenes that keep Chinese viewers' mouths open with laugh. As far as I observe, omitting scenes is based on Chinese philosophical terminology uncommon in English-speaking countries. Also, wordplay omitted may be difficult to make sense in English, unless notes can be added which will impose extra reading and understanding pressure on viewers instead. Those culturally-bound phrases, what Leppihalme (1997) calls 'culture bumps', are more often than not baffling or impenetrable for receptor text readers (p. 197). Compared to verbal humour, non-verbal humour bears a certain degree of universality and mutuality between Chinese and global cultures. Visual humour, as a major type of non-verbal humour in this film in particular, well reaches English-speaking viewers via costume design and physical performance - two main aspects of *mise-en-scene*. Visual humour in the film is characterised by song-and-dance duet, a folk art that stemmed from northeast China but has gone popular nationwide. Slapstick performance is well integrated into and has enhanced the whole film's hilarious atmosphere. Therefore, the ending of non-verbal humour is more fortunate thanks to visual presentation. Still, this study is explanatory and has been on the basis of a limited sample of original and target language subtitles. There is still need for a better method of transferring humour into English without incurring unnecessary pressure on viewers.

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