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Multimodal Translations of Contemporary China. A Case Study of 21st-century Drama Film Posters for Festivals

Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore a corpus of multimodal translations of 21st-century movie posters for globally acclaimed Chinese drama films. Since all verbal and visual factors contribute as the paratext to attract the audience from different markets at first sight, monomodal analyses of posters are not suitable for the exploration of functional metafunctions. Drawing on visual grammar, and providing both a qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper analyses 66 posters of 20 drama films which were awarded, nominated or screened on the occasion of international film festivals, where multimodal translations play a crucial role in relation to the transmission of meaning across different countries. Empirical results suggest that designers apply resemiotisation, recontextualisation and reinterpretation in the inter-modal and intra-modal translations for internationalisation purposes and with the scope of providing a portrayal of contemporary Chinese society. Results also suggest that further steps towards the integration of internationalisation and idiosyncrasy in the visual grammar of multimodal translations are necessary for reception issues in overseas markets.

1. *Introduction*

In recent years, considerable literature has grown up around the theme of multimodal translation in film discourse, subtitles, and visual materials as well as taglines and semiotic features in film posters (e.g. Chuang 2006; Laird 2012; Mahlknecht 2015; Mubenga 2009; Rizzo 2020; Taylor 2003; Taylor 2016). Posters, which function as the threshold and invitation to the movies, are designed to convey the theme to an audience at a glance with both visual and textual messages in images, titles, cast, taglines and commentaries.

However, far too little attention has been paid to how the visual grammar of posters is systematically constructed to cater to different markets. Without the comprehensive analysis of visual grammar, research carried out on the monomodal analysis of posters would not fully explore the metafunctional realm and the shifts in multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006, 1) observe that all the elements of images, people and places combine to help to construct the meaning, as syntax does in a text. Likewise, Ledin and Machin (2020, 18) state that semiotic choices can “connotate particular ideas about the world”. Therefore, it can be argued that the study of visual grammar applied to the survey of posters is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of designing and marketing strategies.

To fill the research gap, drawing upon visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006), this study scrutinises 66 posters from 20 globally-acknowledged Chinese drama films¹ for China and overseas markets (2000-20). The primary purpose of this article sets out to explore the visual grammar of the posters, particularly the participants’ relationship with the outside world, the audience and the internal relationship and the shift for audiences in different cultures; second, it aims to investigate the multimodal translation of posters; third, it attempts to explore the factors influencing multimodal translation practices. More specifically, the study strives to address the following research questions: 1) What the visual grammar of Chinese and overseas posters involve; 2) The modalities by means of which poster designers convey messages to overseas audiences by exploiting multimodal translation; 3) The reasons why overseas posters are involved in the multimodal translation shift.

To the best of my knowledge, this represents the first study which sheds light upon the visual and textual composition of posters representing Chinese drama films, which could generate fresh insight into meaning constructions referring to the portrayal of contemporary China. From a theoretical perspective, the present survey supplements multimodal translation with the investigation of the metafunction of images. From a pragmatic dimension, findings contribute to illuminating multimodal translation procedures with empirical evidence for a larger international audience.

1 Drama genre focuses on the key moments of “an everyman protagonist”, or the realistic and commonplace protagonist (Selbo 2014, 70).

2. *MDA and multimodal translation: A focus on posters*

Movies, also known as the “seventh art form”, are the synthesis of photography, *mise en scene*, movement, editing, sound, acting, dramatisation, story, writing ideology and critique (Giannetti 2015, 489-515). A great deal of previous research has focused on the study of international posters via MDA as the methodological approach to the scrutiny of visual products.

2.1 *A review on movie posters*

Originally designed as “public announcements and notices”, posters² promote information containing both images and text, functioning as the advertisement of the product (Smith 2018, 5). To maximise the features of the products and enlarge the audience, posters display multiple functions from being informative to promotional. Albeit commercial and purposeful, posters tend to include “hybridisation” as a marketing strategy, since advertisements “use all their imagination to dilute the commercial part with the status, authority and credibility from other genres and discourses” (Rahm 2006, 208). Accordingly, movie posters may attract audiences with aesthetic, informational, and promotional value for popularisation and distribution as visual products pertaining to the sphere of the film industry. Posters usually present the theme and content of the movie by making use of the most representative and symbolic images, including the text of the title, tagline, awards, commentaries, cast and the release date. Nevertheless, each poster may vary greatly as the selection of specific messages may address audiences originating from different markets. This procedure is one of the most common advertising strategies, which means that the final composition of posters is targeted in terms of content, media selection and message (Kumar and Gupta 2016).

Up to now, some studies have reported the pragmatic and semiotic value of movie posters. In practice, posters function as the invitation and introduction of the movie, that is, as paratextual elements, since they are released temporally earlier than movies. In many cases, movie posters present plots in the condensed

2 The history of movie posters can be traced back to the tradition of circus poster, gradually recognised as an integral part of the movie industry (see Rhodes, 2007).

texts of taglines (Mahlknecht 2015). With reference to movie posters as “entryway paratexts”, Laird (2012) puts emphasis on the contextualisation and manipulation of meaning in relation to the marketing value and the overemphasis on star image in post-war Japan. Cavalcante (2013) supplements that posters perform a complex “double work” in theme construction and in relation to the numerous paratexts of film reviews, movie posters, and DVD commentaries. Posters tend to be appealing and deliver a message swiftly and in a persuading way with a condensed message, often with exaggerating tones that will be easily fixed in memory (Allen 1994). Most research seems to be confined within the borders of textuality, thus paying less attention to the exploration of visual images.

Another paradigm of multimodal analysis for film posters concentrates on semiotic constructions. For instance, Shahid et al. (2015) analyse semiotically the highlighting of titles and colours in Bollywood film posters from structural parameters, semantic influence and symbolic meanings. Maiorani (2007) examines the promotional campaign (1999-2003) of *The Matrix* trilogy, focusing on the interplay between verbal and visual semiotics through a selected corpus of posters in which important aspects of the semiotic images of posters are revealed, whereas a comprehensive visual grammar survey is neglected.

2.2 *MDA: A systemic functional approach*

The mode is a “socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning” (Kress 2010, 79).³ All the modes, visual and verbal alike, function to present the meaning to the audience. For instance, visual metaphors are adopted as the translation of visual modes, as well as the “personification of abstract concepts” (Refaie 2003, 87). Multimodality is “an interdisciplinary approach that understands communication and representation as more than language and attends systematically to the social interpretation of a range of forms of making meaning” (Jewitt 2016, 69).

Language and visual images are different “in a fundamental sense”: linguistic texts develop in a chain of sequences of words, clauses, and paragraphs. Instead,

3 Kress (2010) encompasses a large variety of communication including visual, aural and textual representations into mode. Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) further expand the concept of ‘mode’ to the olfactory and tactile communication.

visual texts focus on the part-whole relationship for meaning construction in the overall work (O'Halloran 2008). Drawing on the Panzani advertisement, Barthes (1964/1980) is the first to include the image as an important means of conveying a message. He observes that an image conveys three messages, namely, linguistic, coded iconic, and non-coded iconic. Linguistic messages function as the anchorage to control the readers to the intended information among polysemous messages, while advancing the action. A coded iconic message is symbolic with connoted images whereas a non-coded message is resented by pure images, the "denoted images" without any implications. Correspondingly, both the linguistic (with complimentary information) and symbolic coded message types can be operated as purposeful guidance for the readers (Ibid.: 269-280). Despite his systematic survey of images within printed presses, Barthes does not formulate a framework for the purpose of visual image analysis.

Placing language within the social semiotic system, Halliday (1985/2014) classifies the metafunction of language and identifies three distinct levels entailing three different but coordinating spheres, that is, what he calls the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings which interact for meaning construction. The tripartite framework provides a comprehensive analysis of language on textual, communicative and social levels.

Building on Halliday's taxonomy of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006) develop a top-down contextual framework, where visual grammar is meant to extend the metafunction of language to the other semiotic resources for the representational, interactive and compositional meanings, thus, presenting a linguistic, pictorial and cognitive understanding of visual grammar. Representational meanings focus on the action of participants in specific settings, interactive meanings are closely related to the interpersonal relationship between the viewers and participants, whereas compositional meanings convey visual weight. Visual grammar is explanatory in the description and interpretation of various resources which combine both visual and textual information, thereby providing an innovative and comprehensive perspective in understanding visual products.

Painter et al. (2013) stress the need of sequences of images, the range of possibilities for point of view and visual resources, striving to analyse emotional engagement in picture books. They frame the metafunctions of the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings based on the case study of

children's picture books. Ideational meanings are specifically realised by the character manifestation or appearance, inter-event relations and circumstances, interpersonal meanings are conveyed by means of focalisation and pathos, and textual meanings are based on the layout. This three-dimensional framework is apparently more suitable for cartoons and movies marked by the presence of sequenced images for visual, emotional and literacy demands.

Over the past two decades, modality has been intensively investigated for its coverage of semiotic resources, which presents a holistic view encompassing verbal and non-verbal resources of acoustic and body language. Recent developments in the field of MDA have inspired transdisciplinary research on linguistics, visual art, semiotics, and education, and led to an increased interest in the analysis of visual metaphors in visual products including products such as advertisements, children's books, architecture, and teaching materials (Feng 2012; Feng and O'Halloran 2013; Friedman and Ron 2017; Graakjær 2019; Lim 2019; Motta-Roth and Nascimento 2009; Peled-Elhanan 2008).

The present study, within the context of MDA (and visual grammar), explores meaning-making processes as the result of new trends in contemporary communication studies, where visual images converse with translation issues.

2.3 The context of multimodal translation

Multimodal translation extends translation studies to all modes by placing it "in a larger context composition and design". Compared with "rock 'n' roll" which combines a variety of musical styles, multimodal translation brings revolution and brand-new value to translation for the analysis of multimodality of textual and visual messages (Kaindl 2020, 50-65). It has triggered a huge amount of innovative inquiry in translation beyond linguistic limitations to a broader context of non-verbal communication.

Drawing upon the Peircean semiotics, Jakobson (1959) provides the first study of semiotic translation in his tripartite classification of intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Whilst defining intersemiotic translation or "transmutation" as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems", he is primarily concerned with verbal to non-verbal transfer and does not pursue the semiotic concept further and systematically. Along the same lines, Toury (1986) proposes the binary typology of intrasemiotic

and intersemiotic translating⁴ between verbal and non-verbal language (Ibid.: 1113f). Nevertheless, multimodal discourse is not taken into consideration. More recently, Kaindl (2020) offers a comprehensive analysis which divides translation into intra- and intermodal translation at the modal level, and intramedial and intermedial transfer at the medial level. Intramodal translation is the translation “within a modality”, while intermodal translation is beyond modal limitation. Furthermore, he embeds multimodal translation in a cultural context and reflects the meaning evoked by the specific modes (Ibid.: 6of). Accordingly, multimodal translation studies can be conceived as a framework containing various levels of translation units that entail the spheres of culture, society, and ideology.

It is observed that, due to the complexity of the symbolic meaning of signs, multimodal translation for “global consumption can become sensitive when translated for communities professing different socio-cultural and religious values from those of mainstream Western cultures” (Pérez-González 2014, 128). Multimodality has become a key concept to investigate audiovisual translation in general, film discourse analysis, communication studies, among the others (Taylor 2003; Baldry and Paul 2006; Mubenga 2009; Remael and Reviere 2018). The analysis of multimodal or cross-modal cohesion in films is therefore instrumental to audiovisual translation practices and, although much conceptualisation and theorizing remains to be done, multimodal cohesion constitutes a particular challenge in AVT, as well as in media accessibility.

When it comes to the study of posters from the MDA perspective, attention is paid to the pragmatic meaning of posters and the semiotics of a movie genre. As visual products, the visual grammar of posters reveals: a) narrative and conceptual processes; b) the view of the participants’ points of view; c) the foregrounded information relating to the movies. Nevertheless, the interrelationship between the posters and their visual grammar constructions, as well as the interdisciplinary connection between visual grammar and intercultural communication parameters across different markets, are still neglected research areas.

Studies in interdisciplinary multidimensional perspectives have certainly expanded and encouraged new trends in translation moving from mere linguistic (textual) settings to visual frameworks, where Kaindl’s intra- and intermodal

⁴ Toury (1986) maintains that translation “may have more than one semiotic border to cross” and classifies intrasystemic translating into intrasystemic and intersystemic types of translation (Ibid.: 1113).

types of translation are employed as instruments for the analysis of visual products. Given for granted that any type of visual image, textual information, font, colour, and layout contribute to the reception of movies addressed to audiences belonging to different cultures, this study points out that text-to-image and image-to-image translation applied to Chinese and international posters of Chinese movies still requires scholarly attention and needs to be contextualised. Drawing upon visual grammar and multimodality methodologies, and against the backdrop of intramodal, intermodal and intercultural communication, I investigate and analyse processes of multimodal translation applied to posters produced for internationally acknowledged Chinese drama films across two decades (21st century) and for a variety of international markets.

2.4 Frameworks of visual grammar

Language plays the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunction, since it helps to construct human experience, enact social relationships, and create coherent texts (Halliday 1985/2014, 30f). Images are likewise encoded with meanings which navigate and inform the readers with equal significance and metafunction in the visual mode. Based on systematic functional grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006) construct the analytical tripartite framework of visual grammar in terms of ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunction:

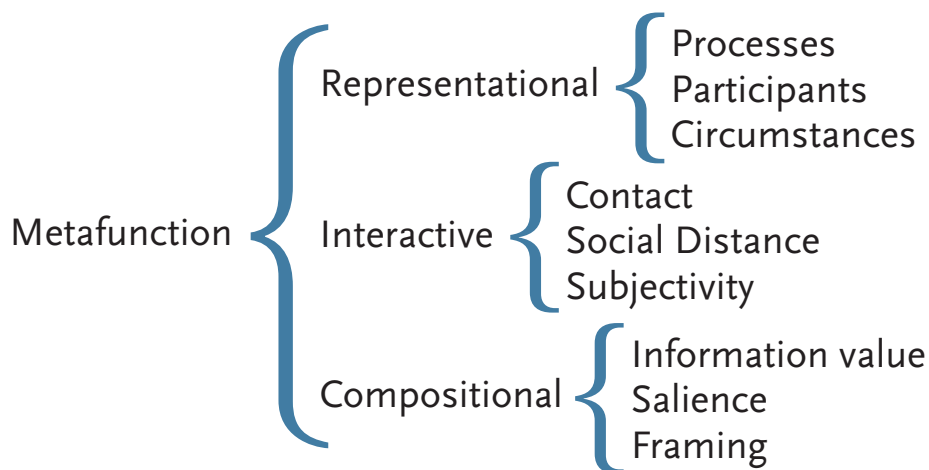


Fig. 1. Kress and van Leeuwen's metafunctional framework (adapted from Feng and Espindola 2013)

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the semiotic system presents the relationship between the objects and “the world outside” in representational meanings, interactive meanings of social relations among producers, viewers and objects, and compositional meanings with reference to the internal relationship of the objects and the external relationship with the context (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 41-43).

More specifically, representational meanings in posters focus on the participants’ “action and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements” in a given setting (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 59). These meanings are presented by the participants’ interaction with others as individuals or a group in the setting. Interactive meanings are closely related to interpersonal meanings, that is, the relationship between the viewer and the participants realised by contact, social distance, and subjectivity. Compositional meanings are constructed by information value, salience, and framing, which convey visual weight. Taken together, visual grammar provides a full-scale analysis of images, thus enhancing the status of the image, a commonplace yet often underdeveloped area of communication.

3. *Data and analysis*

The data for the purpose of this analysis consist of a corpus of 66 posters (33 Chinese and 33 overseas posters) produced for 20 Chinese drama movies awarded, nominated and/or screened for international film festivals. The Chinese posters under scrutiny are collected from *Douban*, the most popular movie website in China, whereas the overseas posters from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the world’s most popular and authoritative source for movies and TV series.

The general criteria for the selection of the subjects consider: a) to what extent the Chinese posters are applied to the local market or movie websites; and b) to what extent overseas posters disseminated across European, American and Asian markets fully present the variety and representativeness. Visual and textual information – ranging from images, titles, taglines and commentaries – is carried out by means of visual grammar and multimodal translation. The analysis consists of two steps: to begin with, the first level of survey involves the identification of representational, interactive and compositional meanings according to the visual grammar parameters; secondly, multimodal translation is taken in account entailing the intra- and intermodal translation processes that occur in the transfer from Chinese to overseas posters.

Of the 66 movie posters, 60 have totally different images, layouts and textual messages. Three movies, which share the same stills for the Chinese and overseas markets, have diverse salience and textual messages on the posters. These differences testify to the application of purposeful strategies which are market- and context-oriented from the outset. The representational, interactive and compositional meanings of the Chinese and overseas posters are illustrated in Table 1:

		Chinese posters		Overseas posters	
		n	%	n	%
Representational	meaning				
Narrative process	Non-transactive	25	75.8	25	75.8
	Transactive	8	24.2	8	24.2
Participant	Individual	8	24.2	13	39.4
	Group	22	66.7	27	51.5
Circumstance	Authentic scene	11	33.3	20	60.6
	High modality	8	24.2	5	15.2
	Low modality	14	42.4	8	24.2
Interactive meaning					
	Contact Offer	28	84.8	31	93.9
Social distance	Demand	5	15.2	2	6.1
	Long	12	36.4	8	24.2
	Medium	17	51.5	20	60.6
Subjectivity	Close-up	3	9.1	5	15.2
	High-angle	2	6.1	1	3
	Eye-level	30	90.9	29	87.9
	Low-angle	1	3	3	9.1
Compositional meaning					
Information value	L/R	9	27.3	10	30.3
	Centre/margin	17	51.5	19	57.6
	Top/bottom	7	21.2	4	12.1
Salience	Tagline	18	54.5	5	15.2
	Commentary	1	3	16	48.5
Framing	Connect	15	45.5	15	45.5
	Separation	7	21.2	4	12.1
	Segregation	5	15.2	4	12.1

Table 1. Visual Grammar in Chinese and Overseas Posters

Table 1 displays an overview of the visual grammar composition in Chinese and overseas posters. A closer inspection of the table shows that both Chinese and overseas posters are similar in the three dimensions, including narrative process, contact, subjectivity, and information value. However, some parameters, such as participant, circumstance, social distance, and salience, vary greatly as shown in the table. As for representational meanings, the percentage of individual participants and the presence of authentic scenes in overseas posters are significantly higher than in Chinese posters. Social distance in interactive meanings abundantly varies in the posters. Most strikingly, salience in compositional meanings shows a sharp contrast between Chinese and overseas posters. Further analysis will indicate that the shift in multimodal discourse conveys visual and textual messages to audiences belonging to non-Chinese markets.

3.1 *Resemiotisation in representational meaning*

Representational meaning reflects the relationship between the object and the outside world, which illustrates the ongoing activities and the experience in a circumstance. Most of the participants in Chinese posters are a group of characters engaged in a non-transactional action in low modality settings. 22 cases present the participants as a group (i.e. lovers, family members or a community in a non-transactional process). Furthermore, their identities are revealed in textual messages or costumes, as exemplified in the texts belonging to *The Piano in a Factory*, the doctors' uniform in *Blind Massage* and the traditional costume of Mongol nationality in *Tuya's Marriage*. In addition, the supplementary textual messages in the taglines also help to construct the representational meaning by introducing the theme, plot, participants, and circumstances, as shown in the following examples: 1) *The Wild Goose Lake*: "In a rainy night, the story happens **in a southern city**"⁵; 2) *Still Life*: "Two unexpected love stories crisscross **along China's great river**".

Aside from the messages for the introduction of the circumstances, the participants in Chinese posters are often placed in the setting of low or high modality. Visual modality is a marker of the meaning of truth or falsehood as the modal auxiliary in language, ranging from "the absence of

⁵ Translation is mine unless otherwise specified.

background to the most fully articulated and detailed background” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 161). The lowest modality of black and white decontextualises the participants and presents a ‘typical example’ situated in a specific location. On the contrary, the high modality produces surrealism and abstract effect. Instead, most oversea posters place individuals in authentic circumstances. The contrast is exemplified in the posters for *The Piano in a Factory* (fig. 2):



Fig. 2. Multimodal translation from group to individuals

As illustrated in Fig. 2, despite the similarity in presenting the awards, the textual messages such as the tagline and introduction of the main characters are in sharp contrast in the Chinese and American posters. The plight of laid-off workers is revealed in the introduction of “a low-life gang leader”, “a retired thief”, “a quack”, “a butcher prince” (left to right) in *Gang de qin* (Piano of Iron) and foregrounded in high modality in the Chinese poster. Instead, the American counterpart highlights a man with an accordion facing the viewers in

the authentic setting of desolated buildings with a chimney together with the title *The Piano in a Factory*, which describe the setting and the protagonist's identity. The significant difference in multimodal translation lies in the shift of circumstance.

The visual modality cues indicate that the majority of Chinese posters presents the participants as generic, or commonplace figures in contemporary China. By contrast, most oversea posters resemiotise visual grammar with individuals engaged in a non-transactional action in authentic settings. Over half of the overseas posters (60.6 per cent) apply authentic scenes as the circumstance, placing the participants in the representative landmarks of China such as *Three Gorges along the Yangtse River*, *Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai*, *Wenfeng Tower in Fenyang* and real scenarios of factories and counties.

3.2 *Shifts in distance and angle in interactive meanings*

Interactive meaning presents the contact, social distance and subjectivity between the viewers and participants. The participant's "gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enters into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 117-19). Demand is "a form of direct address" (Ibid.), often represented by the participant's gaze, as the viewers establish imaginary relationships with the participants. Conversely, the offer image provides "the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation" (Ibid.). Most Chinese (84.8 per cent) and overseas posters (93.9 per cent) adopt an 'offer' image to the audience with the participants engaged in their everyday routines, such as dining around the table, meditating, or riding a bicycle.

Social distance can be categorised into a long shot, medium shot and close-up while the intimacy between the viewer and the participants increases in accordance with the distance. Although most Chinese and overseas posters apply medium and long shots which represent objective social distance, interestingly, the distance is shifted closer to the viewer in overseas film posters as illustrated in the Chinese and American posters for *Mountains May Depart* in Fig. 3:

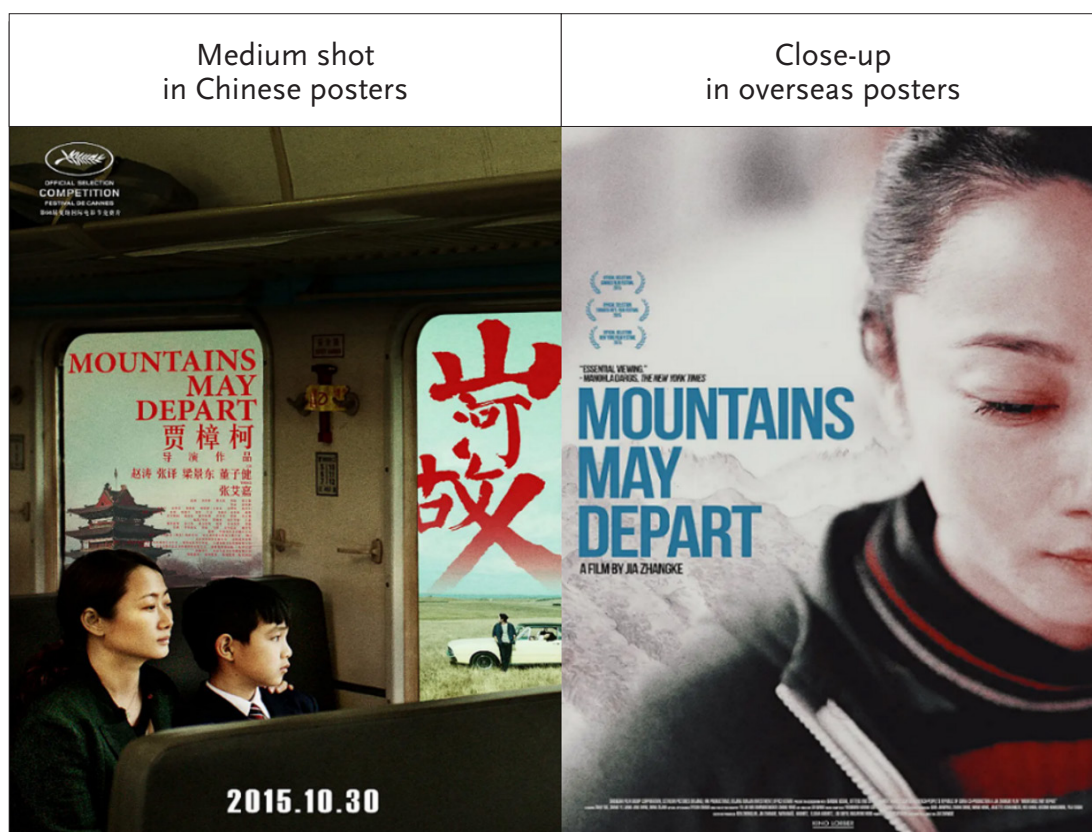


Fig. 3. Shifts in social distance

As shown in Fig. 3, the social distance in the American poster (R) is shifted from medium shot in its Chinese counterpart (L) to close-up, thus revealing the subtle facial expression and emotion of the participant. Accordingly, the overseas poster establishes a more intimate relationship and empathy between the participants and viewers because the shorter the shot of the picture is, the closer and more intimate the social distance. Of all the 33 overseas posters, six are adjusted from long to medium shot and four posters from medium to close-up.

In terms of subjectivity, the vertical angle reflects the power between the viewer and the represented participants. The majority of the posters apply the eye-level angle (90.9 per cent Chinese posters and 87.9 per cent overseas ones), representing the viewers' equal attitude to the participants. It is noteworthy that overseas posters use 3 low angles, hence providing the 'everyman protagonist' with more superiority over the viewer.

3.3 *Shifts in compositional meaning*

Most Chinese posters tend to place taglines in the centre or top to underline the theme, thus applying the centre-margin orientation to highlight the participants. The participants, titles and taglines (18 posters) are depicted more salient in the posters. In addition, more segregation is adopted to showcase the connection involving the participants in chronological order or to emphasise their complicated relationship.

Similarly, most overseas posters adopt a centre-margin orientation, with occasional applications of top-bottom orientation to illustrate the contrast between ideal and reality. A difference in salience lies in the application of ratings and commentaries in overseas posters. Almost half of the overseas posters (48.5 per cent) quote commentaries from authoritative film critics of leading journals, including *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Los Angeles Times*, as well as from the ordinary audience on the *Rotten Tomatoes* website.

4. *Discussion*

Results shows that designers have chosen to preserve the similarity in narrative processes, contact and information value when dealing with multimodal translation. However, they also apply the inter- and intramodal transfers to help to illustrate the film themes to overseas audiences.

4.1 *The visual grammar of Chinese and overseas posters*

The first question in this study has sought to identify visual grammars in Chinese and overseas posters. The study found that, in the first place, designers tend to apply groups as participants, more non-transactive action and low modality in Chinese posters, which presents the protagonists as typical examples in representational meaning. Secondly, more offer images, medium shots and eye-level angles are displayed in interactivity, hence portraying the contemporary Chinese individual with an objective and equal attitude. Thirdly, the composition foregrounds the centre-margin orientation and segmentation, making the participants and their

connections more salient. As a result, a higher proportion of group participants, segmentation and tagline contribute to achieving a more dramatic effect in Chinese posters.

In contrast, the overseas counterparts apply more individuals occupied in the non-transactional actions in authentic circumstances in representational meanings. In addition, social distance between the participants and the viewer is shortened and more low-angle viewpoints are applied to foreground the participants in interactive meanings. Last but not least, centre-margin orientation, commentary and connection are foregrounded in composition meaning. Correspondingly, the recontextualisation of authentic circumstance, closer social distance and more centre-margin orientation showcase a more naturalistic aura, intimate relationship and interactivity in overseas posters.

The results corroborate the claim that ‘offer image’ is preferred in “feature film and television drama and scientific illustration” with the viewer as “an invisible onlooker” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 119f). Narrative patterns present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, and transitory spatial arrangements. Non-transactional action is akin to “the intransitive verb in language”, leaving the viewers “to image who or what he may be communicating with” (Ibid.: 59-63). Both Chinese and overseas posters place the participant under the scrutiny of the viewers who witness their information with equal attitudes. Moreover, the difference in visual grammar supports the influence of Italian neorealism including documentary style, actual location and avoidance of artifice in editing Western movies (Giannetti and Eyman 1996, 243), as well as the pursuit of dramatic effects in the Chinese market.

4.2 Multimodal translation and sociocultural factors

As regards the issue of multimodal translations from Chinese to overseas posters, this study found that the overseas posters convey the same theme with both intra- and intermodal translation for the message and intercultural communication elements, thus combining all the verbal and visual modes to spread the theme addressed to the audience worldwide. Table 2 summarises the multimodal translations from Chinese to overseas posters:

Intramodal translation		Intermodal translation	
<i>text-to-text</i>	title translation	<i>text-to-image</i>	title to circumstance
	taglines to taglines		title to participant
	taglines to commentary		
<i>image-to-image</i>	group to individual participant	<i>image-to-text</i>	participant to text
	shift in social distance		
	eye-level to low angle		
	low modality to authentic scene		

Table 2. Across multimodal translation (intra- and inter- modes)

As indicated in Table 2, the first multimodal translation is the resemiotisation within the context of participants involving various shifts such as those from group to individuals, eye-level to low angle and closer social distance in overseas posters, which concurrently throws a spotlight on the individuals from three aspects. First, the individuals and groups of participants are made analogue to singularity and mass pronouns. As opposed to a group of protagonists which tends to attract the views with the interpersonal relationship, individuals on posters make the audience focus on the independent every one protagonist and therefore humanise the specific individual (Machin 2007, 118). Secondly, low angle renders the participants more imposing and prominent, since it generally creates “an impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph” (Martin 1968, 37f). Thirdly, the transition from long to medium shot and medium shot to close-up shortens the distance and enhances the intimacy between the viewer and the participants.

The second multimodal translation is the recontextualisation from high or low modality to the authentic circumstance of the idiosyncratic social background in China. The Chinese posters underscore the dramatic effect and representativeness in high and low modality. Conversely, the designer reveals people’s livelihood in factories and third-tier cities, as exemplified in *The Piano in a Factory*, *24 City* and *Mountains May Depart* in overseas posters. Naturalism in circumstance underscores an ordinary person’s ups and downs in contemporary China with the “unmediated, uncoded representation of reality” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 158).

The third multimodal translation is the reinterpretation in the inter-modal and intra-modal translations of titles. On the intermodal level, the theme is further revealed by the visual and textual messages in participants, costumes, taglines

and commentaries in overseas posters. The reinterpretation further extends the essential (distinctive, metatextual and phatic) functions and optional (referential, expressive and appellative) functions (Nord 1995). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the overseas titles tend to be more salient in phatic functions by applying ‘my’ and ‘we’ as in *In Love We Trust* and *So Long, My Son* and in referential functions by providing the content of the text. Therefore, overseas titles are more interactive in terms of contact with the audience and the content of the movies.

However, it is notable that the salience of the text in movie posters may vary according to the audience in different countries and cultures. For instance, although most overseas posters apply commentaries as textual messages, the posters for the Japanese market present taglines in *Blind Massage* and *A Simple Life* as those in China and underscore family affection in oriental culture. Results further support the idea of Kumar and Gupta (2016) who observe that advertising strategy varies in content and message for different markets.

With respect to the third question relative to the reason for the multimodal translation in participant and social distance, a possible explanation may be attributed to intercultural communication issues that confirm shifts from collectivism to individualism between eastern and western cultures. To begin with, the tradition of East-West cultural dichotomy is similar to “Collectivism versus Individualism” (Smith and Schwartz 1997, 105). From a historical viewpoint, the West’s “capitalist market economy fosters individualism and in turn depends on it” (Hofstede 1980, 233). Results also mirror the ideas of “intercultural transfer” in translation studies towards internationalisation (Bassnett 1998, 132f). The long shot often presents participants as strangers and “the other” who could not reveal “their soul” to the viewers, medium long the objective view and close-up intimate relationship for the exposure of emotions (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2006, 126). The closer interaction illustrates the individual’s comprehension and emotion, which arouses intimacy and humanism among the viewers. The finding is in accord with Kaindl’s (2020) observation that multimodal translation is placed in a cultural context and reflects the meaning evoked by the specific modes (Ibid.: 6of).

Posters are designed to accommodate to the recipient culture and pave up the new market. These findings shed new light on the designing of film posters for overseas markets with the scope of conveying specific cultural themes by means of multimodal translations that is able to communicate with the audience to the maximum through the combination of verbal, visual and sociocultural messages.

5. *Conclusion*

The present study has set out to compare the visual grammar in Chinese and overseas movie posters to examine multimodal translation in representational, interactive and compositional meanings, as well as to provide possible explanations. Findings clearly indicate that overseas posters present more individual participants in authentic circumstances, a closer interactive relationship with the viewers, and more commentary in salience, which is what promotes intimacy and interaction with the viewers. These findings, on the one hand, enhance the understanding of multimodal translation from the visual grammar perspective in relation to the drama genre under scrutiny and, on the other hand, propose the integration of internationalisation and idiosyncrasy tools in the visual grammar of multimodal translations for overseas markets and diverse cultures.

Despite the promising results in visual grammar and the multimodal translation of movie posters, the study is subject to at least two limitations. First, the analysis of posters is compounded by the multiple versions of some movies, which makes it difficult to have totally equivalent counterparts. Second, the information value of some posters is difficult to identify as a result of the combination of centre-margin and top-bottom orientation. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the multimodal translation of movie posters from visual grammar. There are still many unanswered questions about the different approaches and choices in the practice of multimodal translation for artistic content dissemination across different distant or closer regions and locations. In future surveys, it might be possible to elaborate and compare the posters between specific geographical areas, for instance, Asian and European markets, or Chinese and Hollywood movie posters, and the status between image and text, which might help designers to produce more targeted posters.

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Appendix - Twenty Globally-Acclaimed Chinese Drama Films

1. *Platform* (2000)
2. *Unknown Pleasures* (2002)
3. *The World* (2004)
4. *Still Life* (2006)
5. *Tuya's Marriage* (2006)
6. *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2007)
7. *In Love We Trust* (2008)
8. *24 City* (2008)
9. *Spring Fever* (2009)
10. *The Piano in a Factory* (2010)
11. *A Simple Life* (2011)
12. *Apart Together* (2013)
13. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014)
14. *Blind Massage* (2014)
15. *Mountains May Depart* (2015)
16. *Kaili Blues* (2016)
17. *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018)
18. *So Long, My Son* (2019)
19. *Ash is Purest White* (2019)
20. *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019)

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