

## Original Paper

# Cinematic Equivalence in Subtitling: A Case Study of the Biographical Drama *Forever Enthralled*

Kenny Wang<sup>1\*</sup> & Chong Han<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

\* Kenny Wang, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

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### **Abstract**

*We propose in this paper a conceptual model of how equivalence may be achieved in subtitling to allow the target language viewers the opportunity to enjoy a comparable cinematic experience as that enjoyed by the source language viewers. We follow Brock's (2015) adaptation of Goffman's (1981) participation framework in communication and take Nida's (1964) Dynamic Equivalence as the point of departure to propose Cinematic Equivalence as the conceptual model as well as the aim of film subtitling. This model is illustrated by examining the English subtitles of a Chinese biographical film called Forever Enthralled (《梅兰芳》). Based on our conceptual model, we make suggestions for subtitling training and practice.*

### **Keywords**

*subtitling, cinematic equivalence, biographical dramas*

### **1. Introduction**

Equivalence is a controversial and elusive concept in translation studies. Theorists have proposed numerous typologies of equivalence. For example, Baker (2012) discusses equivalence on different levels of language structure. Newmark (1990) talks about “communicative translation” as a contrast to “semantic translation”, where he focused on equivalence in terms of the communicative goal of the message in question. Unlike models of equivalence that have been established on text based translation, the complexities and the multimodal nature of subtitling pose specific challenges for subtitlers as translators. We argue that equivalence in connection with subtitling should take into consideration the specific communicative nature of film viewing. Following Brock's (2015) adaptation of Goffman's (1981) participation framework in communication and Nida's (1964) Dynamic Equivalence, we propose a conceptual model for subtitling, namely *Cinematic Equivalence*, which also serves as the aim

of subtitling. To illustrate this conceptual mode, we take the subtitling of a Chinese biographical film *Forever Enthralled* (《梅兰芳》) into English as a case study.

In order to understand this integrated model, a brief discussion of the practice of subtitling is in order.

## 2. Subtitling

Subtitling is a form of translation where the text is embedded in a multimodal platform of communication. It involves a transformation of spoken language to written language. Subtitling is done under specific media-imposed constraints. For example, in order to accommodate the reading speed of the viewers, the duration in which a block of subtitle is displayed on the screen needs to be between 1.5 and 7 seconds (Gottlieb, 1998, p. 1008). The amount of information contained in a block of subtitle should not exceed 37 characters arranged in no more than two lines of text. The subtitler should also take into account camera changes and synchronise the display of images with subtitles. One of the consequences of working under the media-imposed constraints is that subtitlers typically discard verbal redundancies such as fillers, and exclamations to condense the spoken message in written subtitles. (e.g., Cintas & Anderman, 2009; Georgakopoulou, 2010; Pettit, 2009). Thus the multimodal nature of subtitling distinguishes itself from other forms of translation.

## 3. Subtitling for Cinematic Equivalence

Subtitling as translation may be approached in different ways. In recently times, a number of researchers have suggested placing the “audience” at the centre of translation and subtitling. For example, Hatim and Mason (1997; see also Mason, 2000) adopted Bell’s (1984) notion of “audience design” in their discussion of the role translators play as mediators in communication. Moreover, Jing Han (2014) applies the notion of Bell’s audience design in subtitling, advocating the vital role that “audience design” should play in a subtitler’s judgment-making capacity. According to Jing Han, the subtitler negotiates, mediates, and manipulates subtitles during the subtitling process in order to customise the message to allow efficient comprehension by the perceived TL audience. However, audience design comes at a cost, i.e., it is a trade-off; the subtitler often caters to the TL audience’s preferences at the expense of foregoing certain elements of the SL in the subtitles. Audience design attributes due prominence and importance to the audience, however, the principles that will guide audience design are still open to debate.

Communication in film and drama are often analysed as taking place on two distinct levels in theatre semiotics. For example, Pfister (1988) discusses in depth the notion of an internal communication system for the performers in a dramatic discourse being embedded in an external communication system of the spectators. Similarly, we also take a two-level approach to subtitling and argue that an audience-oriented subtitling discourse ought to be analysed on two levels, namely the message level and the audience participation level. On the message level, equivalence, whilst controversial and

elusive, is nonetheless a fundamental concept for subtitlers to grasp. On the audience participation level, the nature of the audience's participation in film viewing is essential for subtitlers to understand. The subtitlers' understanding of it as manifested in the subtitles will in turn affect the viewers' experience of the subtitle-mediated film.

On this basis, we propose a theoretical model of subtitling that incorporates analyses on both levels. This model draws on two theoretical frameworks, Dynamic Equivalence proposed by Nida (1964), which will address the message level, and an adapted Participation Framework proposed by Brock (2015), which will address the audience participation level.

Nida (1964) proposes dynamic equivalence as the aim of translation, whereby the TL text attempts to create the same effects in the TL viewers as the SL text does for the SL viewers. Nida (1995, p. 224) presents a formulaic representation of the standard model of translation:

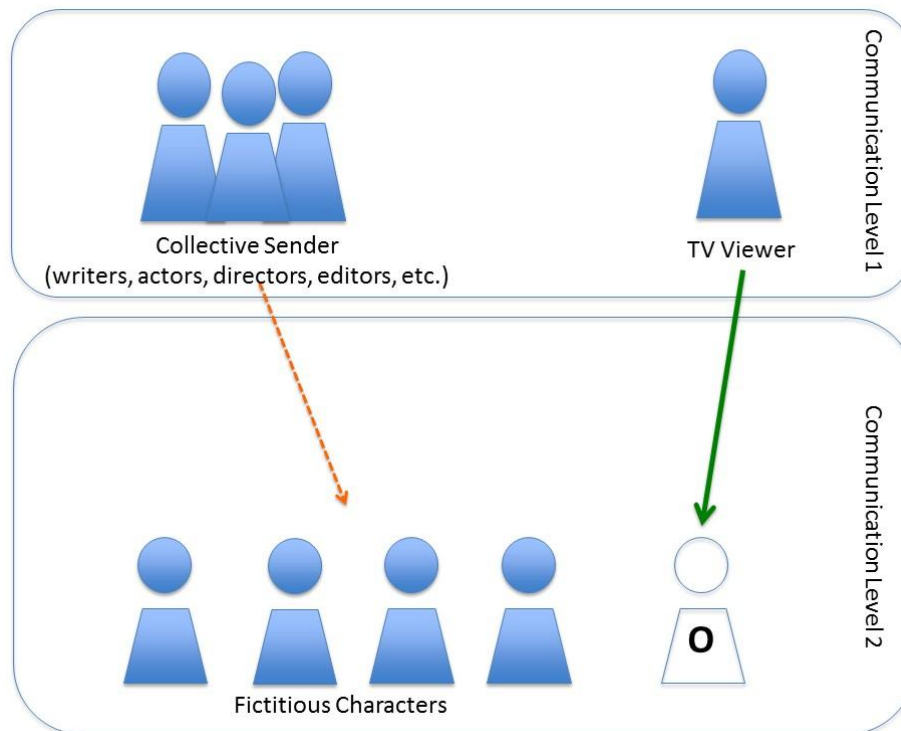
$$S_1 - M_1 - R_1 - R_1 S_2 - M_2 - R_2$$

The S, M, R in the formula stand for Source, Message and Receptor respectively; the subscript 1 stands for the initial communication in the source language (SL), and the subscript 2 stands for the translating of the message and the reception of it by the target language (TL) audience. and TL text respectively; and the R1S2 is the translator. Nida's formulaic representation is for the standard model of translation. However, the various constraints and intricacies of subtitling make it a special form of translation, thus adaptation is called for in discussing equivalence in connection with subtitling.

On the audience participation level, we shall now turn to Goffman's (1981) participation framework and Brock's (2015) adaptation of participation framework to TV viewing to help us understand and appreciate the communicative nature of film viewing. Goffman's (1981) sociological model of participation framework in communication was originally proposed to describe natural conversation. Since then, Goffman's participation framework has been adapted to apply to film and television discourse (e.g., Kozloff, 2000; Babel, 2008; Dynel, 2011). In discussing the cognitive processes of the viewers in understanding film discourse, Babel (2008) accords the participation role of "overhearer" in Goffman's model to the audience. Dynel (2011) however argues that since the entire film/television production is specifically created for the audience consumption, the audience or viewers participate as fully ratified main recipients in the communication.

Brock (2015) contents a model that incorporates Dynel's (2011) designation of viewers as ratified recipients and Babel's (2008) conceptualisation of viewers as overhearers. In this model, he differentiates two levels of communication in television discourse, the first level of communication (or Communication Level 1, i.e., CL1) being that between the TV production crew and the TV viewers, and the second level of communication (or Communication Level 2, i.e., CL2) being the film dialogues between the fictitious characters in the show. In Brock's (2015) model, viewers are ratified participants on CL1, being the intended addressees of the collective sender, i.e., the TV production crew. At the same time, the collective sender attempts to create a fictitious participation slot in the participation

framework in CL2, viewers are drawn into the TV show as they image themselves transcending over the reality-fiction borderline to take up the slot of the overhearer in the same room as the fictitious characters in CL2. Brock points out that “we learn at a very early age that fairy tales, films, stories and plays are not real, but we can live in a fantasy world for a little while anyway, without giving up our position in the real world” (2015, p. 33).

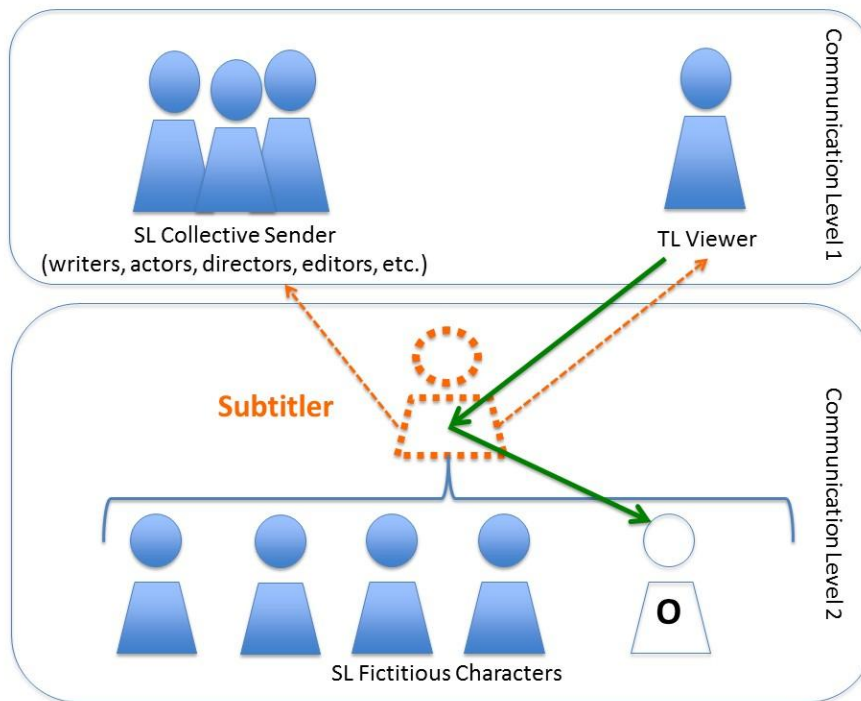


**Figure 1. A Participation Framework for Monolingual Film Viewing (Brock, 2015)**

These scenarios in the literature discussed thus far are concerned with the monolingual film viewing where the collective sender, the fictitious characters in the show and the viewers all share the same language. How, though, would the participation framework vary in a bilingual context where the film is in a language inaccessible to the viewers? This is where the subtitler comes into the picture.

### *3.1 Inter-linguistic Cinematic Experience*

Following Brock (2015) (Note 1), we would like to suggest the following adaptation of the participation framework to subtitle-mediated film viewing. The subtitler facilitates communication to give viewers access to the message conveyed by the film’s fictitious characters. In a bilingual context where the senders and viewers do not share the same language, the viewers’ unimpeded access to the film’s audio-visual signals, combined with their subtitle-mediated access to the fictitious characters’ message, allow viewers to have a comparable viewing experience to that of viewers in a monolingual context.



**Figure 2. A Conceptual Model of Cinematic Equivalence for Subtitle-mediated Film Viewing**

Figure 2 shows that the TL viewers access the SL communication at CL2 through the subtitle. The subtitle mediates the entire communicative transaction behind the scenes, the subtitle's invisible presence is manifested textually through the subtitles. The TL viewers, with the facilitation of the subtitles, imagine themselves as taking up the overhearer role in CL2. Successful mediation in this situation, as indicated by the broken line arrows, requires that the subtitle conducts background research into and develop an awareness of the collective sender's communicative intent in producing the film as a form of communication with the viewers on CL1. Successful mediation also hinges on the subtitle's active dual membership and appreciation of the SL speech community of CL2 and the viewers' TL speech community of CL1. The outcome of successful subtitle-mediation is the TL viewers enjoying an equivalent viewing experience as that enjoyed by SL viewers of the same film.

A viewer's cinematic experience of a film is largely shaped by two factors, namely the Culture and Language as well as the Time Setting of the film (Note 2). Table 1 below illustrates the amount of efforts required by the subtitles in subtitling films of different linguistic-cultural backgrounds and time settings for the target viewers.

**Table 1. Degree of Similarity of Language/Culture and Time Setting and Amount of Effort Required for Subtitlers**

		Time	
		Similar	Dissimilar
<b>Linguistic-cultural System</b>	Similar	Spanish movie set in Contemporary Spain for Contemporary Italian viewers	Spanish movie set in Ancient Spain for Contemporary Italian viewers
		<i>Least challenging for subtitlers</i>	<i>More challenging for subtitlers</i>
	Dissimilar	Chinese movie set in Contemporary China for Contemporary Italian viewers	Chinese movie set in ancient China for Contemporary Italian viewers
		<i>More challenging for subtitlers</i>	<i>Most challenging for subtitlers</i>

In Table 1, Language and Culture are collapsed into one variable to highlight how the disparity in the time setting of the film and the time in which the viewers live pose different degrees of challenges for the subtitler. A film would be least challenging to subtitle if the SL text and the TL text are typologically similar (e.g., Spanish and Italian), the two cultures are of relatively close proximity (Spain and Italy), and the time setting of the film coincides with the time of the viewers (e.g., 21<sup>st</sup> century). On the other end of the spectrum, a film would be most challenging to subtitle if it involves languages belonging to two linguistic typologies (e.g., Chinese and Italian), where the two cultures are distant from each other (e.g., China and Italy), and there is a temporal distance between the time in which the film is set and that in which the viewer lives (e.g., 18<sup>th</sup> century China and 21<sup>st</sup> century Italy). In a monolingual filming viewing situation, as exemplified in Figure 1, if the time setting of the film on CL2 coincides with the time in which the viewers in CL1 live, the impact that time has on the understanding of the viewers would be minimal. In a bilingual or inter-linguistic viewing context, as shown in Figure 2, the time setting of CL1 and CL2 are the same, however the language of the viewers differs to that of the characters in CL2, the inter-linguistic communication by its very nature creates a layer of complexity such that the greater the dissimilarity and distance there is between the SL language and culture of the film and that of the TL viewers, the more difficult it is for the subtitler to achieve an equivalent cinematic experience for the TL viewers. In a bilingual and cross-generational film viewing scenario, in addition to the dissimilarity of the languages involved, when there is disparity between the time setting of the film and the time in which the viewers live, such disparity creates further layer of complexity. In summary, the level of ease or difficulty with which the TL viewers on CL1 may assume the role of the overhearer on CL2 is affected by the degree of similarity of the time settings and

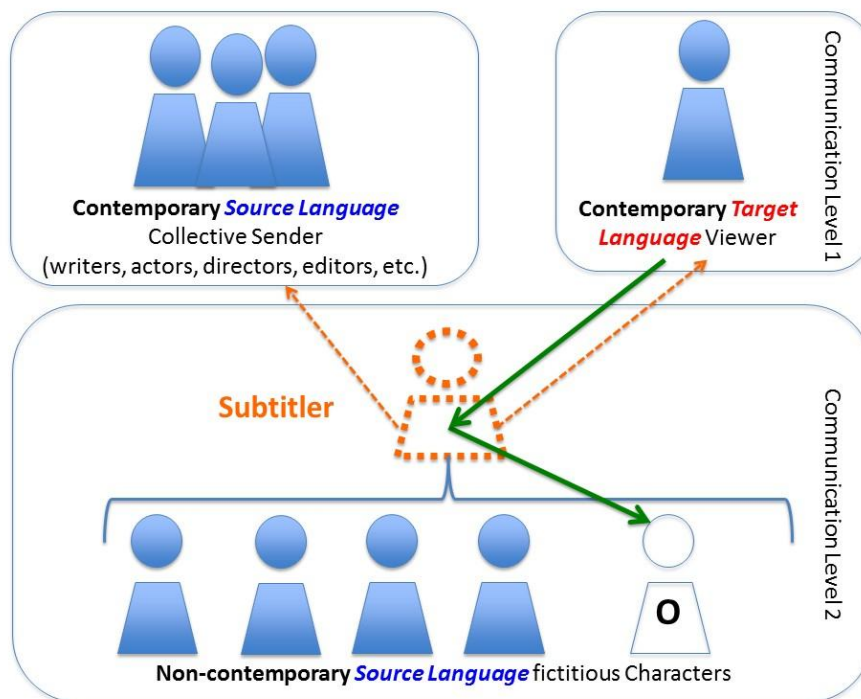
languages involved.

### 3.2 Cinematic Equivalence

We propose to integrate the adapted participation framework for subtitle-mediated film viewing experience as illustrated in the above-mentioned Figure 2, and Nida's dynamic equivalence, and take it as the basis for arguing that subtitlers should aim to achieve *Cinematic Equivalence* in film subtitles. We adapt Nida's model of translation to subtitling as the following:

$$S1(\text{Time, Culture, Audio-vision}) - M1 - R1 - R1S2 - M2 - R2(:R1)$$

*Cinematic Equivalence* is where by means of the subtitles, an R2 of the film enjoys a similar cinematic experience as an R1. In this paper, cinematic experience is conceptualised as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. A Conceptual Model of *Cinematic Equivalence* for Cross-generational Film Subtitling**

Figure 3 incorporates the Language/Culture and Time Setting factors in the subtitling and viewing experience. As indicated by the broken line arrow to the left, the subtitler conducts background research into and develop an awareness of the collective sender's communicative intent in producing the film as a form of communication with the viewers on CL1. The boundary between the TL viewers on CL1 and the fictitious characters on CL2 not only separates the two levels of communication, it also indicate a time difference, a generational divide. As we eluded to in Table 1, where there is a cross-generational difference between the time setting and the TL audience, additional efforts on the subtitler's part would be required to produce subtitles that would facilitate the TL viewers to take up the

role of a peer overhearer.

When a film is set in a different generation to the contemporary audience, the non-contemporary language would likely require the contemporary viewers to put in additional efforts in comprehending the language in order to fully enjoy the intended cinematic experience. Likewise, in an inter-linguistic situation where subtitling is required, the subtitler should take it upon him/herself to also generate subtitles that require a certain amount of additional processing efforts on the part of the TL viewers; this will offer the TL viewers a similar cinematic experience to that of the SL viewers (see Gutt, 2010). In other words, if the act of overhearing by SL viewers on CL2 in Figure 1 is effortful, the subtitler of the film (in Figure 2 & 3) should similarly mediate the participation such that the act of overhearing by the TL viewers on CL2 also prove to be effortful to a similar extent.

In the following section, we would like to demonstrate how this conceptual model of Cinematic Equivalence can be used to analyse film subtitling. We will present a case study where two versions of subtitles of a film are compared and discussed to illustrate the extent to which the subtitles achieve Cinematic Equivalence.

#### **4. Subtitling Biopics: A Case Study**

Our model of *Cinematic Equivalence* is illustrated by a case study of the award-winning Chinese film *Forever Enthralled* (directed by Chen Kaige), which depicts the life of the legendary Peking Opera singer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961). The theoretical motivation for choosing this film is the fact that this particular film presents the greatest challenges for subtitlers in achieving cinematic equivalence due to its cross-generational and cross-linguistic typological nature.

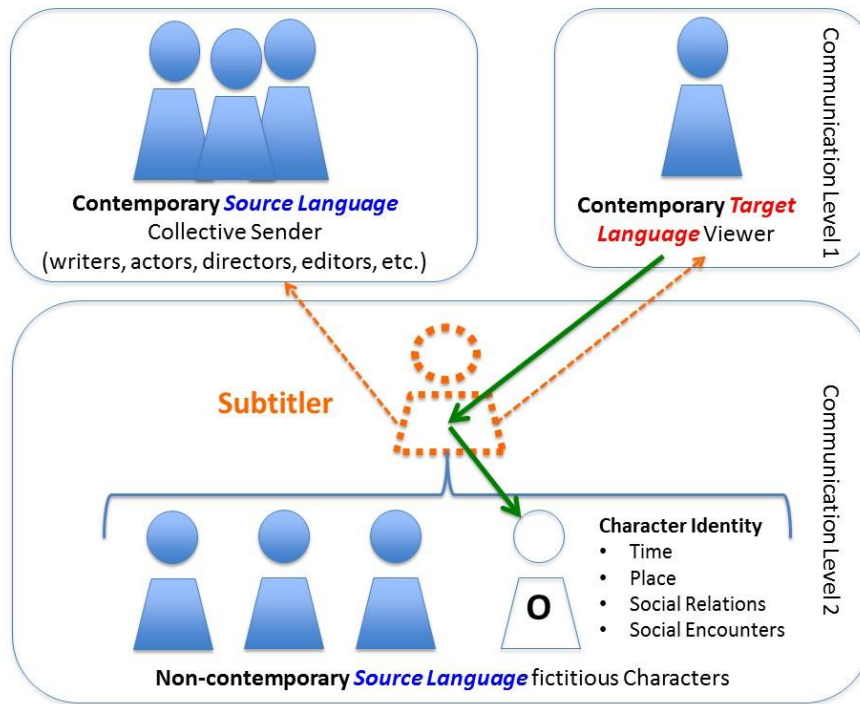
In this genre of films, the portrayal of characters is crucial. This is evident from Bingham's introduction of biographical dramas or biopics as a film genre:

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or...to be that person's audience. (Bingham, 2010, p. 10)

Character identity is often represented through utterances and linguistic stylisation, and the extent to which subtitles reflects or distorts identities in the original film is a special challenge to which subtitlers must rise up (Petrucci, 2012, p. 231). In view of the essential role of understanding characters in biopics, we utilise Meinhof and Galasiński's (2005) framework on character identity in interpreting character identities in biopics. This theory adopts four context parametres in interpreting character identities as created in the film through linguistic resources, namely the Time, Place Social Encounters and Relations. Once the subtitler understands the character identity intended in the film, he or she attempts to facilitate the TL viewers in arriving at a comparable understanding of the character identity



through subtitling, as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4. A Conceptual Model of Cinematic Equivalence in Cross-generational Biographical Dramas**

In Meinhof and Galasiński's (2005, pp. 20-41) framework, the context of Time refers to the specific geo-political and historic time frame within which one places oneself; a person constructs his or her identity in relation and also in opposition to the ideologies of the time period. The context of Place is the physical place or surrounding of a location with which, and also against which, one identifies. The context of Social Relations refers to identity constructed through setting up relations between the "in" groups and the "out" groups. In a similar vein, the context of Social Encounters has to do with the manner with which one interacts with members of other groups.

In *Forever Enthralled*, the biopic of the legendary Peking Opera singer Mei Lanfang, the protagonist is portrayed as an highly esteemed opera singer, a stoic master, an advocate for his profession, and a patriot. Despite his elevated status as a master singer, he longs for leading a life of an ordinary man. In private life, Mei Lanfang is portrayed as a husband who develops romantic feelings for his female singing partner Meng Xiaodong. In the ensuing subsections, we shall use the content categories of Time, Place, Social Relations and Social Encounters (Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005) as entry points to analyse the construction of Mei Lanfang's identity through linguistic means.

#### 4.1. Context of Identity: Time

*Forever Enthralled* is set in the early part of last century. Language changes and evolves with the passage of time. As illustrated by the set of triangles on the right in Figure 1 and the bottom right corner of Figure 2, the disparity in time between the period in which a film is set and the present day creates an additional dimension for comprehension. The contrast between the Mandarin spoken in the film and that of today is even more pronounced due to extrinsic factors such as the 1919 colloquialisation of written Mandarin campaign (*Báihu à Yǐndòng* 白话运动). With the 1920s-1940s as the backdrop in which *Forever Enthralled* is set, the Mandarin spoken by the characters in the film reflected the language of that period in history.

The non-contemporaneity of the Mandarin spoken by the characters in the film can be readily perceived by native Mandarin viewers, and this perception of linguistic non-contemporaneity in turn forms part of the cinematic experience of the Mandarin viewers. The subtitler by definition is a member of the contemporary Mandarin viewers. In subtitling the film into English, the subtitler should have regard to this distinctive linguistic characteristic and the sense of non-contemporaneity and nostalgia it engenders, and attempt to create a similar cinematic experience for the English viewers by also injecting a sense of nostalgia in the subtitles.

Raising the formality level in the subtitled dialogues gives the English viewers the impression of the dialogues being distinctly dissimilar to that of the present-day conversation styles with which the viewers are accustomed. A rise in formality may be accomplished lexically or syntactically. An example is given below:

**Table 2. An Example of Elevating the Register** (Note 3)

	Chinese	Official Version	Fansub Version
1.1	听了您的话 我只想跟您说 对不起啊	Hearing you speak, I want to <b>apologise</b> .	Now that I've heard you, I want to say <b>I'm sorry</b> .

In this scene, Mei Lanfang was confronted by a pistol-wielding fan who was obsessed with Mei Lanfang and was enraged with jealousy over Mei Lanfang's intimate relationship with Meng Xiaodong. Upon hearing the gunman's complaint and in an effort to claim him down, Mei Lanfang apologized to him. "Sorry" in English is ambiguous between (a) feeling apologetic and (b) having sympathy for a person's plight. The word 对不起 (*duìbùqǐ*) in the original corresponds only to the first meaning of "sorry", i.e., feeling apologetic, and is non-ambiguous. Rendering *duìbùqǐ* as "to apologise" ensures that the subtitle does not leave room for the alternative, non-intended interpretation.

In terms of the register, leaving aside the nuanced difference between "I want to apologise" and "I want to say I'm sorry", the register of the former is higher than that of the latter. Using a higher spoken register will help to add credibility and sincerity to Mei Lanfang's apology to the gunman in this

instance, but more importantly it helps to portray Mei Lanfang's character as one of prudence, poise and stoic.

Shifts in register may be achieved through syntactic means, an example of which is the inversion in question formation. Uttering declaratives with a rising intonation ("SVO?") is a common colloquial strategy for question formation in both English and Mandarin. Questions in this syntax occurred numerous times in the film.

**Table 3. An Example of a Dispreference for Question Formation through "SVO?"**

	Chinese	Official Version	Fansub Version
2.1	刘锡长您给了抚恤金?	Brother, you paid Liu Xichang?	You approved a bereavement payment?
2.2	怎么又活过来给自己 的抚恤金签字呢?	He came back to life to sign the receipt?	He signed the receipt after he died?

Since "SVO?" as a question formation strategy is uniquely colloquial, as it relies on vocal changes, it is considered low on the register scale. To reduce the casualness of the dialogue, the subtitler may seize the opportunity to raise the formality by manipulating the syntax, namely to subtitle "SVO?" in the unmarked question formation syntax in English, e.g., "Do you like it?" as opposed to "You like it?". Although neither version here adopted the strategy of converting "SVO?" questions in the unmarked English question formation syntax, we propose that this strategy can further reinforce the non-contemporariness of the dialogue.

#### 4.2 Context of Identity: Place

The film portrays the two complementary sides of Mei Lanfang, i.e., him being on-stage and off-stage. When on stage, Mei Lanfang is a much idolised legendary singer. When off stage, Mei Lanfang is a man of great humility and innovation. He is not bound by traditions, he dares to break free from stereotypes, and he stands up against oppressions to defend the dignity of his fellow artists and countrymen.

The example in Table 4 below is taken from a press conference Mei Lanfang held. In it, he related a conversation he once had with a senior singer.

**Table 4. An Example of the Use of Poetic and Literary Devices in Subtitling** (Note 4)

Chinese	Official Version	Fansub Version
我有个长辈	There was an old singer	There was a senior singer,
我管他叫爷爷	I called Great Master.	a master singer.
临死跟我说	Just before he died,	His last words were,
晚华	he said to me...	“Wanhua”,
你将来帮爷爷帮个事	Wanhua,	“promise me to do one thing.”
我说什么事啊	Please do something for me.	I said, “What is it?”
他说	I asked what.	<b>He said,</b>
把咱们唱戏的地位提拔一下好	<b>He said..</b>	<b>“You must raise the status</b>
不好	<b>Raise the status of us actors</b>	<b>of opera singers,”</b>
让人家把咱们当人看好不好	<b>in the eyes of the world.</b>	<b>“so we’d be treated with</b>
我说好啊	<b>Let us be seen</b>	<b>respect.”</b>
可我不知该怎么办到...	<b>as worthy of respect.</b>	I said, “Sure.”
答应老人家的事	I agreed.	But I don’t know
我想	But I don’t know	how to fulfil my promise.
我只能做到这样了	how to fulfil that promise.	I guess...this is the best I can do.
	This is the best I can do.	

In the old days, opera singers used to be despised. When on stage, Mei Lanfang was liked and revered, but when off-stage, the profession as a whole, of which Mei Lanfang was a part, still lacked social status. Towards the end of the film, the Japanese invading forces made various attempts to cajole and coerce Mei Lanfang into performing for the army. However, as a patriotic man, Mei Lanfang firmly rejected those attempts. He went as far as wearing a moustache and injecting himself with a vaccine to induce fever, so as to further support his resolve to abstain from performing. In Table 4, following his refusal to perform for the Japanese forces, Mei Lanfang held a press conference to publicly explain his decision to abstain from performing. The reason for his decision was two-fold: as a Peking Opera singer, he aspired to lifting the image of the profession; and indeed by having no share in entertaining the invaders, Mei Lanfang was able to dignify his profession by maintaining integrity under pressure. Secondly, as a patriotic man, despite the fact that he played a female role on-stage, he demonstrated that in real life or off-stage, he was a man of courage, of uprightness and uncompromising spirit in the face of aggression.

Both versions brought out the essence of the speech. However, the official version adopted some structures that were more poetic, e.g., *Raise the status of us actors in the eyes of the world* and *Let us be seen as worthy of respect*, whereas the fansub version was more straight forward. The more poetic and formal tone in the official version is more befitting of the content of the speech and the surrounding

atmosphere. In view of the place in which the utterance occurred, i.e., in the context of a press conference, we see prudence in the subtitles of the official version in their rendering of the utterances in a formal tone.

The shortcoming of both versions is the distortion of the original speech act. In the Chinese original, Mei Lanfang narrated a dialogue between the senior singer and himself. Mei Lanfang's narrative was given in a conversational tone, the senior singer's exhortations were phrased in the form of earnest requests ending with the tag question 好不好 *hǎobùhǎo* (*will you?*). The speech act of request in the SL was transformed into command in the TL in both versions: in the form of imperatives in the official version, and with the modal auxiliary "must" in the Fansub version. The image of Mei Lanfang in the original was one where he proactively fulfilled his promise. However, this image was distorted in the subtitles as one where Mei Lanfang was obligated to follow orders given by a senior performer.

#### 4.3 Context of Identity: Social Encounters and Relations

The social relations and encounters of Mei with others in the film include his peer performers, his agent, his admirers, rivals, lovers and enemies. Such relations and encounters contribute to the shaping of the true character of Mei Lanfang. Whilst the image of Mei Lanfang in real life is typically one of a much revered legend, but as the film's script wright Yan Geling once said, the film intends to characterise Mei Lanfang as someone "who undergoes a transformation from an idolised divine being to a human being of flesh and blood (电影里梅兰芳的过程是从精灵到人) (Note 5)."

In a letter sent by Qiu Rubai, who later became Mei Lanfang's agent, the divine status that Qiu Rubai accorded Mei Lanfang can be clearly seen from the writing below.

**Table 5. Retaining the Poetic Feeling of the Original in the Subtitles** (Note 6)

Chinese	Official Version	Fansub Version
梅兰芳先生	Dear Mr. Mei Lanfang,	Dear Mr Mei Lanfang,
我头一回看您的戏	It was my first time seeing you.	I watched your show
就迷上了	I'm spellbound.	for the first time
我和所有的人	Like everyone,	and I was fascinated.
都不知该把您当成男人	I'm unsure if I think of you as a	Like everyone there,
还是当成女人	man or a woman.	I don't know if I should
好像一鼓掌	It seemed the act of applauding	take you as a man,
就会泄露了心里的一个什么秘密一样	revealed some secret in my heart.	or as a woman.
可只有心里最干净的人	Only one whose mind is clean	As I applauded, I felt I had
才能把情欲演得这么到家 这	and pure could express passion	revealed
么美	in such an exquisite manner.	a secret from my heart.
我在西洋考察过戏剧	I've made a study of the theatre	Only someone
		with the purest of hearts

如果有什么事情我能帮忙	overseas.	can express desires so well
告诉我 一定尽力	If there's anything I can help	and so beautifully
	you with, Just say so and I'll be	in their performance.
	there.	I studied drama overseas.
		If I can help you in any way,
		let me know.

The letter, shown in Table 5, was written by Qiu Rubai to Mei Lanfang after Qiu Rubai watched Mei perform on stage for the first time. The letter marked a turning point for Qiu Rubai in that Qiu Rubai went from being a critic of Peking opera to an enthusiast and a loyal fan of Mei Lanfang overnight. The careful and conscientious handling of this letter by the subtitler is crucial in highlighting the divine status that was accorded to Mei Lanfang by Qiu Rubai and the wider audience by extension. The overall language of the letter is rather poetic. Whilst both versions of the subtitles managed to convey the message of the original, subtitles that manage to retain a poetic feeling would be more effective in conveying the full force of this important social encounter. In the official version, 告诉我 一定尽力 is translated as “Just say so and I'll be there”. The subtitle is colloquial while the original wording is more formal and poetic.

Another strong indicator of social relations is kinship terms as forms of address. The choice of address terms often hinges on the degree of politeness involved. Politeness system involves three factors: “power, distance and the weight of imposition” (Scollon & Scollon 2011, p. 52). In the Chinese culture, politeness is often conveyed through the use of salutations and kinship terms in addressing interlocutors. Chinese people treasure kinship, and the use of kinship terms to address nonkins “shows warmth, friendliness and kindness.” (Gao, 2013, p. 192) Kinship terms may also be used to acknowledge seniority, thereby rendering respect to the addressee. In the film, the characterisation of Mei Lanfang as a humble and respectful man is done through his use of kinship terms in addressing others.

**Table 6. Use of Kinship Terms to Address Nonkins (7)**

	Chinese	Official Version	Fansub Version
7.1	是梅得爷，不是梅大爷	Master Mei will do.	It's Mister Mei not Sir Mei.
7.2	六爷，三哥，别逼我	Mr. Feng, Brother, don't pressure me.	Mr Feng, Brother Qiu, don't force me.
7.3	十三爷爷	Master Shisan.	Master Shisan Yan.

In (7.1), Meng Xiaodong met Mei Lanfang for the first time, and she called him 梅得爷 *Méi dè yé* (*dè yé*, lit. big-grandpa), which can be roughly translated as “Master Mei”. Upon hearing this, Mei

Lanfang corrected her, saying that it should be *Mā d'èy'é* (*d'èy'é*, lit. *d'è-grandpa*). The difference between the two is that *d'ày'é* is an honorific for a man who is senior in age or in social status, while *d'èy'é* is an address term in the Beijing dialect (Note 7) that signals dignity and respect. In (7.2), Mei Lanfang uses 六爷 *Liù Yé* (lit. “sixth grandfather”) and 三哥 *Sān Gē* (lit. “third older brother”) in addressing Feng Ziguang and Qiu Rubai. These address terms serve the dual purpose of indicating Mei Lanfang’s closeness with the addressees while acknowledging their seniority and elevated status in relation to Mei Lanfang himself. The pragmatic force of kinship terms is well illustrated in (7.3) where the opera singer who goes by the stage name 十三燕 *Shísān Yàn* (lit. “thirteenth swallow”) is addressed by Mei Lanfang as 十三爷爷 *Shísān Yéye* (lit. “thirteenth grandpa”). The reduplication of *Yé* to *Yéye* introduces a nuanced change in connotation similar to the English term “grandfather” in its full form and its endeared form of “grandpa”. Mei Lanfang respectfully addressed him as *Shísān Yéye* to show deference as well as endearment and intimacy.

The context of social encounters and relations contributes to the shaping of the character’s identity. (Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005) However, this particular aspect of character identity is very challenging for subtitlers, as the vocative use of kinship terms such as *Sān Gē* (lit. “third older brother”) is seldom used in English, and it is generally deemed as unidiomatic and unacceptable if applied to nonkins. In this regard, neither of the versions of subtitles adequately project the context of social relations in English to allow the English viewers to sense Mei Lanfang’s character identity. Nevertheless, the failure in conveying the full pragmatic force of addressing nonkins with kinship terms cannot be attributed to the subtitlers’ translation competence. As Nolan (2012, p. 55) points out,

“‘Untranslatability’ is chiefly due to the inherent features of cultures and languages, not the individual ability of the translator or the limitation of the craft. The problem of ‘untranslatability’ arises from the fact that different cultures divide up the universe in different ways, and that their language therefore contain ideas, words and expressions to describe those different concepts and culture-specific features.”

#### 4.4 Summary

Character identity is an integral part of biopics. The content categories of Time, Place, Social Relations and Social Encounters serve as useful devices to help subtitlers to analyse and appreciate the character identities in a film. Such appreciation and understanding provide the basis for them to produce subtitles that are conducive to portraying a comparable character identity to the TL viewers. From the viewers’ point of view, any distortions in re-portraying the character identity, in reproducing the message and the cross-general and cross-cultural sense of the film could potentially lead to Cinematic *Inequivalence*. In our case study, through comparing the original dialogues with the two versions of subtitles, we saw that sometimes one version might better captured the character identity of the protagonist, and at other times both versions fared similarly. The aim of the case study is not to rate one version as somehow superior than the other, but rather it is to see if the original portrayal of Mei Lanfang was reproduced in

the subtitles.

## 5. Conclusion

We propose an integrated conceptual model of Cinematic Equivalence as the aim of subtitling. The model was illustrated by means of a case study of subtitling a biopic. Subtitling must be viewed as communication, which should be understood not just on the level of the message, but also on the level of audience participation. On the message level, attention should be paid to linguistic expressions. On the audience participation level, film viewing is a multi-party communicative activity where the subtitler plays a crucial role in facilitating the TL viewers to immerse in the communicative context and imagine themselves as taking up the overhearer role in the film.

Based on the model, we propose that successful subtitle-mediated communication hinges on the following factors. Firstly, the subtitler needs to develop competence at the linguistic level, becoming a competent user of the source language and the target language. Secondly, the subtitler needs to develop competence in the source culture of the film and the target culture of the viewers. Thirdly, the subtitler should conduct background research into and develop an awareness of the collective sender's communicative intent in producing the film. Finally, for films which are set in a different time period, especially one with a generational divide to the viewers, such inter-generational differences should be addressed in subtitling. Essentially, successful subtitle-mediation should lead to *Cinematic Equivalence*, which means TL viewers enjoying a comparable viewing experience as that enjoyed by SL viewers of the same film.

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## Notes

Note 1. As Brock also eluded to in his footnote 1, televised discourse and film discourse overlap to a large extent; whilst Brock's (2015) adaptation is concerned with TV comedies, we feel it is equally applicable to films more generally.

Note 2. We acknowledge that a variety of factors such as special visual and sound effects work together to create the cinematic experience for the viewers. However, we have confined our scope of discussion to Culture, Language and Time Setting as these three factors are directly relevant to the subtitle.

Note 3. The subtitles given herein are presented in their original linebreaks. However, all font changes in the subtitles are added for emphasis.

Note 4. Due to the length of this segment, the subtitles in Table 4 are not presented here in their original line breaks.

Note 5. 《严歌苓: 真实与虚幻之间的梅兰芳》Mei Lanfang in the real and fictional world: Yan Geling. Accessed on 25/9/2014 from [http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2008-12/05/content\\_16905595.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2008-12/05/content_16905595.htm)

Note 6. Due to the length of this letter, the subtitles in Table 5 are not presented here in their original line breaks.

Note 7. 黎明称拍《梅兰芳》走大运 不怕和张国荣做比较 Leon Lai: Starring in Forever Enthralled brought him good luck, he is okay with being measured against Leslie Cheung. Accessed on 25/9/2014 from <http://magazine.sina.com/gb/southernpeopleweekly/20081219/2008-12-18/ba65283.html>.