

Translanguaging as a Communicative Method in Film-Audience Relationship—Case Study of the Film *Wu Ming*

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Abstract—The film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade) is characterized by the heterogeneous usage of mixed idioms, namely, Shanghaiese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Japanese. The mixture of idioms restores the true historical complexity of Shanghai under the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945, which, in return, reflects the film-making aesthetics by inviting the audience to step into the embedded context with embodied experiences. The translanguaging-informed plots divert the audience's attention from the pure linguistic content to an interpretative and emotional tone of what is seen: the audience's full repertoire is mobilized for an inferential analysis when they are guided to immerse in the contextual multilingualism, catch up the suspense and symphonize with the sense- and meaning-making of the film. On one hand, the heterogeneous usage of mixed idioms maximizes the contextual effects of the film on its audience, underpinning the orchestration of diverse means of the Audiovisual texts (AVTs); on the other hand, in processing the informative heterogeneous usage of idioms, the audiences are given the lens of translanguaging to perceive the ongoing negotiation of powers, the dichotomies of doubts versus trust, and the ideological and attitudinal positions of protagonists. Thus, with translanguaging as a communicative method, the initially blurred identity of protagonists is revealed gradually by the film's narration and equally by the audiences through their embodied processing and inferential efforts by mobilizing all their available repertoire. In addition, the film's metaphorized name – *Wu Ming* (literal meaning, “nameless”), is aesthetically communicated to and demystified by the audience through their participatory agency.

Index Terms—*Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade), translanguaging, embodiment, sense- and meaning-making, embeddedness

I. INTRODUCTION

Film is a popular art that entertains a broad audience, while the audience, in return, is an essential part that defines the film. The film-audience relationship has been a central topic in scholarly research and writings (Gripsrud & Lavik, 2008). On one hand, film production takes into account the audience's aesthetic requirements and expectations, which is especially true for commercial films; on the other hand, audience reviews and ratings have become the vane and reference for movie viewing, which also feeds back the film production. The mutual respect between the film and the audience is a key principle and represents a healthy development of the film, as reflected by the audience theory (Allor, 1988; Carpentier, 2011) that originates in social sciences, rhetoric, literary theory, cultural studies, and communication studies, addressing the exploration of interactions with others and relating pragmatically to communication. Translanguaging Theory, as a cognitive-pragmatic framework for language and human communication (Li, 2011a, 2011b, 2018, 2022), is well-suited to address this matter. It excels in facilitating communication that spans multiple languages, diverse media, and various modes of expression. This framework enables the generation of comprehension and meaning by transcending artificial and ideological boundaries.

The recently released film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade) directed by Cheng Er has generated a hot discussion among the Chinese audience. The discussion not only focuses on filming techniques for shots, scenes, and sequences but also touches on film aesthetics through the heterogeneous usage of various idioms throughout the film. Its translanguaging-informed design entails messages and meaning that the film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade) intends to transmit and communicate with its audience.

The film director Cheng Er has manifested his attitude toward the film audience on several public occasions. According to the film director, the audience should be respected and the audience shouldn't be underestimated. Exploring this saying, the present article pretends to use the film *Wu Ming* as a case study and probe into its translanguaging-informed scenes as a study object, to further elaborate the film-audience relationship and explore how translanguaging is employed as a communicative method in the film and how the film's sense- and meaning-making is transmitted to the audience through the lens of translanguaging. In addition, it also examines, from the audience's perspective, how the film's metaphorized name – *Wu Ming* (literally meaning “Nameless” in Chinese) -, is aesthetically communicated to and demystified by the audience through their participatory agency/embodied participation.

II. TRANSLANGUAGING AS A COMMUNICATIVE METHOD IN THE FILM *WU MING* (HIDDEN BLADE)

Wu Ming (Hidden Blade) is a film directed by Chinese director Cheng Er and put on screen during the Chinese New Year of 2023 in China as a commercial film. The film's name, *Wu Ming*, means, literally, "nameless", which seems to echo the nameless protagonist-heroes that feature in the film. The film describes China's war of resistance in Shanghai under the Japanese occupation during 1937-1945, where the underground members of the Chinese Communist Party risked sending out information to safeguard China. The film's timeline was from 1941 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and ended with the surrender of the Japanese in the Pacific War in 1945.

In the film, there are many scenes featured with the heterogeneous usage of idioms, namely Shanghaiese, Cantonese, Japanese, and Mandarin. In some cases, conversations are conducted purely in Shanghaiese, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Japanese, while in some other cases, conversations are a mixture of Shanghaiese, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Japanese depending on the situated circumstances. The heterogeneous usage of idioms also characterizes the protagonists, who also switch their language use depending on the situation and object of speaking. This diversified and complicated linguistic phenomenon restores the true complexity of Shanghai under the Japanese occupation in the 1940s when people of different backgrounds and power relations are latent in Shanghai and the heterogenous usage of idioms is a camouflage to disguise true identity. In such a historical background, the seemingly casual dialogues in Shanghaiese might comprise a risky message; the dialogues embedded with mutually understandable Japanese and Mandarin could reveal attitudinal resistance and ideological positions of speakers; the calm and serious interrogation in both Shanghaiese and Mandarin could conceal revenge and betrayal; the sincere and faithful conversation purely in Japanese would be designed "pitfalls" for confidentiality.

Such translanguaging-featured scenes are, as a matter of fact, first revealed by a teaser trailer. In February 2022, the production team unveiled a teaser trailer featuring two men speaking in Shanghaiese. This led to speculation that the entire film might be in Shanghaiese. In response to these rumors, the film released an official poster to clarify that it would also include "Mandarin, Cantonese, and foreign languages". A longer trailer was released in September 2022, as well as its translanguaging-informed post. In the poster released on the official Weibo of the film *Wu Ming* before its release, the intention is anticipatively revealed: "阿拉不是全片上海话, 亦有普通话、广东话、外国话 [Ala is not all in Shanghaiese, there are also Mandarin, Cantonese, and foreign languages]".

As a matter of fact, "阿拉[Ala]" is a Shanghaiese expression, meaning "We". Embedded in the whole phrase in Mandarin, this Shanghaiese expression in first person's plural form stresses its weighing omnipresence. In addition, in the same poster, "谢谢侬" (Xia Xia Nong, a Shanghaiese expression originating from the dialect Wu, meaning "Thank you") is put in an eye-catching position with outstanding font size. The poster confirms the film values the mixture of heterogenous use of various idioms and heightens the use of Shanghaiese. In this manner, the film initiates its interactions with the audience even before the film's release, dropping a hint of its aesthetics through the lens of translanguaging.

III. TRANSLANGUAGING AND SENSE- AND MEANING/MAKING IN FILM

Translanguaging, as a practical theory of language, cognition, and human communication, underscores the importance of engaging multiple senses, various modes, diverse semiotics, and multiple languages in communication. It aims to create understanding and significance by surpassing and dismantling artificial and ideological boundaries (Li, 2011a, 2011b, 2018, 2022). As its suffix (trans- and -ing) indicates, translanguaging involves going beyond conventional limits, breaking down barriers between disciplines and languages, and removing the restrictions that separate human cognition and communication. The "-ing" in "translanguaging" signifies the dynamic process of creating meaning, in which multilingual individuals utilize a variety of sensory, modal, and semiotic resources (Garcia & Li, 2014; Han, 2022; Han et al., 2023). Translanguaging is the active process through which individuals proficient in multiple languages manage intricate social and cognitive tasks by strategically utilizing various semiotic resources to engage, understand, and exist (Zhu & Li, 2016, 2020, 2022; Han, 2022; Han & Wen, 2022; Mu et al., 2022). In this process a principle of abundance is in operation, that is, as many different cues should be produced simultaneously as possible to facilitate communication (Li, 2016).

The film, as a multimodal creation and a channel for constructing meaning, is a combination of various elements (sound, imagery, and language) that convey stories with the purpose of creating understanding and significance for its audience or viewers (Martinelli, 2020). This process of creating meaning or understanding within the film is a fundamental principle in audiovisual communication, particularly when dealing with the intricacies of reality. Through the dynamic interaction of sound, image, and language, the film's meaning or sense is communicated, experienced, and interpreted by its audience or viewers (Han, 2022). In film-audience communication, the meaning and sense-making are not the mere mode or modality (of sound, image, and language), but an imaginative combination and coordination of various means, which is best captured by translanguaging, a method instrumental to understanding and appreciating the multimodality of the film:

Translanguaging itself is a methodology offering a new conceptual framework that promotes a number of important analytical shifts: shift away from language as abstract codes to meaning- and sense-making; attend to a wider range of multi-semiotic resources whilst refusing to privilege particular modes and methods of

meaning-making over others; approach translanguaging as an expansively integrated experience. (Li, 2022, p. 1)

As such, translanguaging, as a method that promotes analytical shift, values all the available resources beyond language. Defined as "the creative selection and combination of communication modes (verbal, visual, gestural, and embodied) available in a speaker's repertoire" (Baynham & Lee, 2019, pp. 24-25), the lens of translanguaging empowers communication by making possible "a wider range of multi-semiotic resources" in delivering the audiovisual means (sound, image, and language) of films, refusing to "privilege modes and methods of meaning-making over others" (Li, 2022, p. 1). The boundary-breaking perspective of translanguaging is manifested through the film AVTs for meaning- and sense-making (Han, 2022). In addition, the translanguaging method is further validated by its "expansively integrated experience" (Li, 2022, p. 1). It invites the audience/ viewers to have the embodied experience and catalyze their inferential and participatory viewing experiences: the audience/viewers' attention is guided to shift from the pure linguistic content to "facial expression, body posture, or font size and style" (Li, 2022, p. 1), and with an orchestration of all means to achieve the abundance of meanings and the "expansively integrated experience" as indicated below:

Analytically, the focus must not be on one means of meaning- and sense-making (linguistic or otherwise) only or one at a time, but on the assemblage and orchestration of diverse means. We, therefore, need a maximalist approach that focuses on the simultaneous management of multiple means of meaning- and sense-making, and includes the role played by such things as feeling, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, as well as ideology, and power in (trans) languaging. (Li, 2022, p. 1)

The lens of translanguaging expand and enhance the conceptualization of the meaning- and sense-making, serving as a "maximalist approach" to achieve abundance that embraces "feeling, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, as well as ideology and power". In light of such a translanguaging method, the film-audience communication is abundantly enriched in terms of sense- and meaning-making: the creative "assemblage and orchestration of diverse means" (Li, 2022, p. 1) and modalities by AVTs enrich the suspense, tensions, and climax. In the same vein, audience/viewers in the embedded and situated film scenes are empowered to mobilize visual, audio, linguistic, and sensory repertoires for the expansively integrated experience. The translanguaging-informed film invites the audience/viewers to participate in the orchestration of all diverse means by shifting attention to the entanglement of powers hidden beneath the superficial linguistic content.

This translanguaging-informed sense- and meaning-making in film examines and questions the aesthetics of the film-audience communication, in which either the film's creativity for meaning-making or the audience's embodied viewing experience is maximized and optimized through the lens of translanguaging.

Further probing into the translanguaging-informed method in communication, three concrete questions are raised: 1) how the method is employed by the film to guide the audience? 2) how the method is perceived by the audience in their viewing experience? and 3) how the orchestration of diverse means achieves film-audience optimal communication? These questions are to be answered by the case study of the film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade).

IV. LENS OF TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE FILM *WU MING*

The lens of translanguaging in the film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade) is two-folded. On one hand, the film emphasizes its multilingual, multisemiotic, and multimodal expressions by restoring the true historical complexity of Shanghai under the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945, where the heterogeneous usage of diverse idioms constitutes part of the film narration background. Translanguaging nurtures the basic tone of the film, as shown and revealed by its official teaser trailers. On the other hand, translanguaging is employed in concrete scenes to weave the story's suspense and plots, which supports the film's whole narration structure. In some scenes, shots are made purely in Shanghainese, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Japanese, while in some other scenes, shots are a mixture of Shanghainese, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Japanese depending on the situated circumstances. In addition, the translanguaging-informed method is screened to characterize the film roles, who also switch their languages depending on the object of speaking. By analyzing the following concrete translanguaging-informed scenes from the film *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade), we probe into the sense- and meaning-making of the scenes and explore its film-audience communication.

Translanguaging-informed scene 1:

Setting: Dinner

Location:

Japanese food restaurant, somewhere in Shanghai under the Japanese occupation at the beginning of the 1940s.

Figures: Mr. He, Japanese officer Watanabe, Minister Tang

Mode: Translanguaging in conversation

Scene: Mr. He, Japanese officer Watanabe, and Minister Tang were eating in a Japanese food restaurant, with Japanese music as the background sound. In their conversation, from the beginning to the end, they were talking in mixed languages: the Japanese Officer Watanabe spoke Japanese, while Mr. He and Minister Tang talked in Mandarin. Apparently, they understood each other in the ongoing conversation since no interpreting services were provided. They might even be able to speak the language of others, due to many years of language immersion, but they insisted on speaking in their idioms. The translanguaging-informed conversation

went on very calmly and nobody seemed to be disturbed by others' insistence. There is a scene like this: When asked by Watanabe (in Japanese) the reason for his lack of appetite, Mr. He responded (in Mandarin) that he was not used to Japanese food. Consequently, Watanabe suggested (in Japanese) Mr. He to get adapted to Japanese food.

Analysis: The superfluous information in the conversation seems very casual, like a daily talk between colleagues. However, the atmosphere nurtured by the film closeups, the determined eye contact, and the several seconds of deadly silence against the geisha's Japanese music, underline connotative meanings of such a conversation and invite the audience/viewer to perceive the tension hidden beneath. Japanese food is a metaphor here alluding to the Japanese military ambition. Both Mr. He's refusal of Japanese food and Watanabe's suggestion surpass their linguistic content, suggesting somehow their own political and ideological attitudes. No doubt, Watanabe, the Japanese officer, has the ambition to encroach on the land of China, by then the Japanese food might spread over the vast land, as he has been wishing and manifested by his words; Minister Tang, who works as an official of the puppet regime of Wang Jingwei, manifests his intention as speculator and fence-sitter in the context of the turbulent era. At the moment of the scene, Mr. He is the subject of Minister Tang, but his insistence on speaking Mandarin with the Japanese officer and his resistance towards Japanese food is unusual compared to Minister Tang, somehow betraying his hidden identity. The myth was revealed gradually through the development of plots, and it turned out Mr. He is an underground communist, as well as many other front workers operating under the puppet regime of Wang. Thus, the insistence of Mr. He in speaking Mandarin and his answer to deny Japanese food is, no doubt, the purpose designed by the film, and its meanings are far beyond the superfluous information. Translanguaging is employed as a method to reveal the attitudinal and ideological position of Mr. He against the Japanese occupation, which, in return, paves way for his true identity revealed in later plots.

In this shot as well as in others, the lens of translanguaging is employed to enrich the "expansively integrated experience" "by underpinning the orchestration of diverse means (sound, image, and language) of the audiovisual texts (AVTs). The audience is empowered with the lens of translanguaging to perceive the ongoing negotiation of the (in) visible powers, the dichotomies of doubts versus trust, and the ideological and attitudinal positions of protagonists.

Translanguaging-informed scene II (comprised of several shots):

Setting: Dinner, daily practices

Location: Shanghai under Japanese occupation at the beginning of the 1940s

Figures: Secretary Ye, Japanese officer Watanabe, Captain Wang, Mr. He

Mode: translanguaging practices of a person

Shot a): Secretary Ye was invited by Japanese officer Watanabe for a Japanese dinner. They were talking over dinner, purely in Japanese. Before that, a store (one of the Chinese Communist Party's sites) was raided by the Japanese army, and Secretary Ye was present. His colleague, Captain Wang of the Puppet Regime, asked for leave to celebrate his father's birthday and did not perform a mission, which was suspected by Watanabe. During the dinner, Watanabe commented that everyone seemed to be looking for a way out, to which Secretary Ye replied in Japanese that he had no value in being united and the only way was to go to the darkness. Watanabe was satisfied with the answer and Mr. Ye was trusted further.

Shot b): Secretary Ye dined with his colleague Captain Wang, who talked insensitively about the evil deeds of the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre as a topic of conversation. Later, Captain Wang picked up another topic and complained endlessly about the plate of steamed pork ribs at breakfast. All the conversation between Secretary Ye and Captain Wang was conducted in Shanghainese, as well as all the other dialogues between them, even at the moment they tried to kill each other. The breakfast conversation in Shanghainese inaugurated the film. It happened at a breakfast restaurant on the streets of old Shanghai, drawing immediately the audience into the film's unique era and urban background, setting the translanguaging tone.

Shot c): Secretary Ye met secretly with Mr. He, who knew the execution of the betrayer had been exposed and decided to give up lurking. Mr. He asked Secretary Ye to plan and take the opportunity to let himself further gain the trust of Japanese Officer Watanabe to continue lurking. The conversation was extremely succinct, totally in Mandarin. The conversation was heard without any shots of the faces of the two figures.

Analysis: All the above shots are made purely in Shanghainese, Japanese, or Mandarin. Secretary Ye is the person who appears in all three shots and speaks in different idioms in different shots. His fluent use of Japanese, Shanghainese, and Mandarin and translanguaging in three situated circumstances is not just linguistic code-switching, but a choice with determined purposes: most of the time Secretary Ye speaks Shanghainese, his mother tongue, with his colleague Captain Wang and with his fiancé. In his use of Shanghainese, we see in him the brotherly intimacy with the colleague and affective concern for fiancé, restrained and simple. However, his choice of use of Japanese is full of political ambition: his talk with the Japanese officer Watanabe is purely in Japanese, even though he knows Watanabe understands Chinese (for example, Mandarin, as indicated in previous scenes). By speaking Japanese, Secretary Ye becomes mysterious and ambitious, taking the initiative to please the Japanese officer and then gain further trust. The attitudinal contrast creates dubious suspense concerning his identity. Who is he? A faithful servile follower of the puppet regime? Such suspense lasts until shot C) when he uses Mandarin to talk with Mr. He (his superior of the PCC). His true identity is gradually revealed by this meaningful code-switching but perceived by the audience through

simultaneous management of multiple means of meaning (previous preparatory shots, other roles' identity, inferential clues, etc.). Though no faces are shown in this shot, the message in Mandarin that dramatically contrasts with previous plots is revealing: the use of Mandarin is encoded as an identity magnifier, magnifying all the minuscule clues that have been faintly visible in previous plots, and thus guiding the audience to figure out the hidden identity of Secretary Ye under careful disguise.

Being thus guided by these shots, the audience's attention was diverted from the superfluous content of the conversation, but focusing on the relationships of the involved figures and their true identities which have been myths from the very beginning of the film. In film-audience communication, the process of the audience perceiving the hints is thus sinuously guided by such translanguaging-informed messages and the inferential efforts of the audience/viewer are rewarded at the moment of the identity revealing.

V. CONCLUSION: HIDDEN IDENTITY, HIDDEN BLADE

This article introduces translanguaging as a methodological tool for comprehending the communication between film and its audience. By examining the audiovisual elements (sound, image, language) and delving into the messages influenced by translanguaging, the present study focuses on uncovering the creation of sense and meaning within the film, and illustrates this through a detailed case study of the Chinese film titled *Wu Ming* (Hidden Blade). The translanguaging-informed scenes run through the film and constitute the film's narrative structure. Translanguaging is employed as a method to restore maximumly the real contextual setting of Shanghai under the Japanese occupation in the 1940s, with the heterogenous use of diverse idioms, revealing the dangerous social and historical complexity and justifying the co-existence of mysterious and disguised identities. Translanguaging is also utilized to assist the audience in their inferential endeavors by engaging all accessible sensory resources in the process of negotiating meaning. In doing so, it surpasses linguistic limitations and evolves from mere words into a more intricate form of communication that generates sense and meaning.

The two selected translanguaging-informed scenes, as the key objects of analysis, are autopsied through textual analysis and augmented with the background description. The insidious power and identity messages are in constant debate through code-switching and its orchestration with audiovisual means (sound, image) and extensive integrated experience (hidden attitudes, political and ideological positions, relationships). As the mysterious identity is gradually deciphered and unfolded in the interwoven translanguaging plots, the conversation contents lost their surface meaning in the film-audience communication. It might explain the audience's passion for going to the cinema for the second and third time viewing for deep digging and for the "extensive integrated experience" through worthwhile inferential efforts.

Viewed through the perspective of translanguaging, the communication between a film and its audience is fluidly crafted, nurtured, shaped, and interconnected through a variety of audiovisual methods. The sense- and meaning-making duplicates and reinforces what is visible, and guides the interpretation or emotional tone of what is seen by the audience/viewers. This aesthetics is seen through the power tension hidden beneath the mixture of use of languages in the dinner setting (language insistence by Mr. He and his resistance to the Japanese food), as well as revealed through the translanguaging practices by Secretary Ye, who speaks Shanghainese, Japanese, Mandarin in different situations, revealing to the audience his political and ideological position via management of language usage. As the film's name *Wu Ming* (literally meaning "nameless") indicate, Mr. He and Secretary Ye have no specific names identified, however, their hidden identity is like "Hidden Blade" stabbing into the heart of enemies.

Thus, the film extends beyond the narrative of the superfluous information, making the viewing experiences enriched by inviting the audience to participate in the sense- and meaning-making and enjoy their interpretation and take charge of what is seen. The lens of translanguaging deterritorializes the boundary of the named languages, bringing justice to the marginalized idioms that have been exerting their influences and social impacts. As a method, translanguaging values the boundary-breaking of languages and the repertoire as a whole, echoing the film director's defense: dialect is the soul of the city, something we should not give up. This is how we are in life, no matter where we go in the world, the most unforgettable thing is our dialect and the nostalgia in our hearts. In addition, the translanguaging-informed scenes restore maximumly the true complexity of Shanghai under the Japanese occupation in the 1940s, which also enriches the viewing experiences of the audience, echoing, in the same way, the director's famous saying: the audience should be respected and that the audience shouldn't be underestimated.

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