

# The Subtitle Wagging the Screen: The Untranslated and *One Second's* Cultural Revolution

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Instead of the tail wagging the dog, the few English words at the bottom of the screen, big and small, tell the tale of Chinese-language films and TV series for the global Anglophone audience. This common Americanism suggests the irony that a little, negligible thing or body part like a dog's tail has come to dominate the story itself. Practically, the subtitles speak for the foreign-language film. In the hands of amateurs, the subtitles not only wag the screen—they whack it, twisting it all out of shape like bad TV reception. This universal pitfall deepens in the case of modern China. To rephrase Chairman Mao's dictum regarding women holding up half the sky, the English subtitles apparently hold up the whole sky; they (mis)speak on behalf of the show, missing egregiously when the *Red Sky over the Cultural Revolution* (1966–1976) and beyond does not particularly wish to be wagged, “woked.” The whole sky turns out to be a big hole, a crime scene's bullet hole shot through Chinese consciousness of the *People's Republic of Amnesia*, as Louisa Lim calls the country in 2014. Such weight of political censorship compounds inherent fissures between the alphabet of written English, added extradiegetically in post-production, and the tonal oral Chinese recorded live on location. The translatable and the anglicizable thus clings onto the edge of the screen like a rock climber's fingerhold, suspended over the abyss of the unsayable in collective memory.

Zhang Yimou's 2020 film *One Second* scarcely survives such layers of translation from traumatic experiences fictionalized in Yan Geling's Chinese-language novel *Prisoner Lu Yanshi* (2011) and filmscripts to filmic narratives, not just *One Second* but also its predecessor *Coming Home* (2014). Political headwinds prevented Zhang's film from its premiere in the 2019 Berlin Film Festival. Not yet approved by the Beijing authority for global release and doubtful that it ever will, a pirate version with Chinese subtitles quietly materializes on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqcGwQhLjck>, which could be taken offline even as we speak, its existence as fleeting as any subtitle. Another pirate version with atrocious English subtitles is subsequently uploaded: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSwGiOsh5Y4>. Similar fate may befall the English version, which is just as well.

In current Chinese lingo, these pirate versions on YouTube are *shanzhai* versions. *Shanzhai*, mountain strongholds for rebels throughout the history of imperial China, lies at the heart of the revolt of the insurgent, populist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against colonialism and feudalism in the name of the proletariat of workers, peasants, and soldiers. *Shanzhai* has evolved to designate any counterfeit product or practice that imitate, even parody, others, causing tremendous harm to consumers, endangering their health and finances, both domestically and internationally. *Shanzhai* is translated by Allan H. Barr as “Copycat” in Yu Hua's *China in Ten Words* (2011). Even in an Old China Hand like Barr's, the translation of “Copycat” elides the fact that this cat does more than copying: it is quite catty, red in tooth and claw. With *One Second's* *shanzhai* versions widely available, the CCP's success as an anti-establishment renegade has come back to haunt itself: what it prohibits has been disseminated surreptitiously through social

media. Despite the makeshift, even slapdash quality of the English version, it befits the very definition of shanzhai in defying the CCP authority devoted to self-preservation, even self-glorification.

The protagonist Zhang Jiusheng played by Zhang Yi in *One Second* escapes from a Cultural Revolution labor camp in search of a pre-film propaganda newsreel where his supposedly deceased daughter cameoed for a split second, hence the film's title. Like the father's quest for one second out of an hours-long feature, the film leaves unsaid and unseen much of the context: Where did the escaped convict come from? Which crime did he commit? What happened to his daughter, who had apparently denounced him for her own survival? Why did he seek out an image of his daughter rather than her real self? What is the real and what is the reel? Similar omissions and repressions enshroud the female lead Liu Girl and the supporting actor Fan Movie. Liu Girl is played by Liu Haocun, her name in the film but a nickname because she and her brother called "Liu Younger Brother" have grown up nameless orphans to parents who had perished during, if not due to, the fanatic and bloody campaign. Fan Movie is played by Fan Wei, whose nickname in the film honors this touring propaganda film projectionist. His son is mentally challenged for having helped himself to his father's film solution, which damaged the young child's brain. That the actors' "real" Chinese surnames become their "reel" surnames plays into, unwittingly, the homophones in English.

The preceding exegesis has gone beyond a literal translation of the filmic universe, diving into the unspoken, the inferred within the Chinese context as well as into the intercultural and cross-generic give-and-take. Hence, translation in *One Second* constitutes not only a linguistic practice from fiction to film, from Chinese dialogues to English subtitles, but also a cultural practice from lived experiences to artistic expressions and political suppressions. As such, *One Second* and other narratives of the Cultural Revolution are a cliff-hanger climbing up from the valley of "the Ten-year Holocaust," barely hanging on just like the flash of "white" light, the thin line of English subtitles, before they sink out of frame. *One Second's* untranslatability on account of political censorship and cultural parameters is entirely different from Walter Benjamin's philosophical reveries in "The Task of the Translator" (1955). Benjamin projects his utopian vision of art-for-art's sake onto translation, totally unconcerned with reader reception. By contrast, the untranslated in *One Second* stems not from a ritualistic divine source, but from the precarity over speaking out. Benjamin has the luxury of musing about the translator's task in theory; Zhang Yimou, as world-renowned as he is, must attend to the consequences of such musing in practice. Benjamin can afford to divorce his rumination from real life; Zhang's reality hinges on self-censorship.

Let us start, in Yeats's words, from "where all the ladders start," the bottom of paltry, shoddy English subtitles. In a film that thrives on the filmic language of body gestures and dynamic movements with few spoken words, the practically first attempt at dialogue is mistranslated. After loading up the film reels on his moped, the projectionist Fan's assistant Yang He (rendered as "Yanghe") appears ready to leave at night for the next screening site. To a surprised friend, Yang He responds: "Fan film [Fan Movie] is looking for any fault. Who dare go at night?" The rhetorical question translates, literally, *sheigan zouyelu* when it means figuratively: "Who dare play hooky!" or "Who dare cut corners!" Yang's rhetorical question confirms his intention of immediate departure, contrary to the erroneous subtitle. Yang He takes to the road dutifully, nighttime notwithstanding, to deliver the film reels.

Inept, home-made translation continues unabated. After their physical, even brutal, scuffle over the film reel Liu stole from Yang He's moped, Zhang Jiusheng offers an apology: "I wouldn't beat u if I knew y r girl"; "Why you steal this, sale it?" No matter

how subpar, the subtitles do fill the void left by political censorship. Availing oneself of the English version, alas, afflicts the global reception of *One Second*. Liu's vulgar rejoinder to Zhang's question, "*Guanni pishi*," is gentrified as "It isn't your business," which loses the sting of the original "It's none of your Goddamn business" or even worse with the f-word in place of the G-word. A tramp's tough talk from the gutter is softened for "ears polite" of the world. No translation is perhaps preferable to bad translation; no memory preferable to bad or planted memory. The choice between an empty glass and a poisoned chalice should be obvious. Conceivably, broad-minded non-Sinophone cinephiles could watch it like a silent film without comprehending the dialogue, helped along by the plethora of universal grunts, cries, laughter, and non-lingual sounds. The cinephile's feeling of disorientation offers a visceral taste of the confusion and uncertainty that the protagonist Zhang and millions of victims like him had suffered. Perhaps it is too harsh to call the English version a poisoned chalice. A bottle of corked wine, then, where the translator's good intentions are betrayed by incompetence.

This unintentional misspeaking fails the film's minimalist representation, one that leaves much to be intuited. From the bottom subtitles, the "lowest" common denominator of film language, let us lift our eyes to study the amorphous images on the screen, transcribed onto the viewer's mental screen as synaptic (mis)firing between a little-known Chinese past and a virtual present, if not perpetual on YouTube. The known at our fingertips triggers the unknown from a strange country of a distant time. The mistranslation over Yang He's imminent night ride leads into the dark, unknown Cultural Revolution for the new millennium.

The unfathomable cataclysm uncoils through recurring, defamiliarizing motifs that are, nonetheless, familiar to every human being: families, or rather, broken families of fathers and daughters, either party dead or lost or estranged. The thematic unfolding of one of the oldest human relationships constitutes a metanarrative, a *mise en abyme*, each frame within the frame reflecting the others through the unspooling of films and of family relationships. On our digital devices, we in 2021 and beyond watch Zhang Yimou's film, where Fan Movie projects the propaganda film *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (1964) by way of the rotation of an obsolete analog 35 mm film strip. Parallel viewings coexist within Zhang's film; they also coexist within the film and without, as you and I are shocked by the horror, moved by the anguish. Within *One Second*, villagers watch the propaganda film that is on tour, circling the countryside, whereas Zhang Jiusheng waits for that second in the pre-film newsreel. The spirit of ever-lasting martyrdom eulogized in *Heroic Sons and Daughters* is but a vehicle for the bereaved father's brief *séance* with the departed soul. The cyclical nature resides as much in the touring film reels as in Zhang Jiusheng being treated to what Fan Movie, after the public screening, has spliced together for his eyes only—the small number of frames in a loop where his daughter comes alive again and again. That one flicker illuminating the ghost of a daughter deconstructs the Chinese tradition of family. Fan Movie applies glue to reattach film stocks, the very glue that turned Fan's son dim-witted. The magic of a professional projectionist so mesmerizes Zhang that he is unaware of having been betrayed by Fan to the village authority. Witnessing the severe beating Zhang endured upon arrest, an apologetic Fan performs one last sleight of hand, sliding into Zhang's coat pocket two frames of his daughter's negative.

Negative is the word. Instead of the real daughter, Zhang keeps close to his heart her likeness, albeit overexposed. Yet even the negative keepsake is confiscated by the authority, which discards it like trash en route to the prison. His daughter's negative is soon buried under the sea of blowing sand. When Zhang is released from the labor camp two years later in an epilogue of happy ending, he searches in vain, with Liu

Girl's help, for the negative in the barren desert. Sensing the futility of their effort, the father-daughter pair exchange resigned smiles, gazing into the infinite stretch of sand. They have, in the end, each other. This tableau of lost-and-found segues into a rather melodramatic closing credits with Liu Haocun. Now restored to a chic twenty-something, her well-groomed ponytail cascading down the back of a baseball cap, Liu sings softly, at times whispering, the theme song "One Second" into the microphone, wiping off a tear or two spontaneously. This sensitive touch is not totally unexpected, given that the street urchin's smeared face and tattered clothes have been redeemed throughout by her pretty looks and fashionably unkempt, frizzy bouffant hairdo straight out of the "skin job" Pris's (Daryl Hannah) coiffure in *Bladerunner* (1982) or Maggie Cheung's in *Chinese Box* (1997). If Zhang Yimou ventures into China's dirty past, Liu Haocun's hair styling is already sanitized. If the epilogue's post-Cultural Revolution return to normalcy, not only personal freedom but also the possibility of a new family, intends to heal the primal wound by squatting at the heels of official narratives, the subsequent ban proves that the filmmaker has failed. If Liu's tearful singing intends to provide a closure, rounding off the sharp edges of collective memory, the subsequent ascent of Liu's stardom contrasts sharply with the nameless daughter's descent into the hourglass of history.

Singing has a way of lingering in the ear long after it is done, which presents yet another contrast. The fruitless hunt for the negative in the desert is accompanied by a high-pitched, heart-wrenching female vocal, possibly a rustic folk song in local dialect, unintelligible to the majority of Sinophone viewers. This is the only place absent of Chinese subtitles. A post-production technical oversight? Conceivably, it could be an ingenious move to suggest the emotional intensity soaring far beyond words, rendering subtitles inoperative, redundant. Against this searing "surround sound," the new father and daughter bond over the realization of all that is lost: the past is a roll of negatives, each frame produced by the fleeting present. The indecipherable soundtrack then eases into Liu's "One Second" of the closing credits, the only place of the film with both Chinese and English subtitles. Liu's tears and twice-translated lyrics spell the end of the nameless, faceless folk singer's no lyrics.

The film's father-daughter mise en abyme involves intertextuality. *Heroic Sons and Daughters* is based on the novelist Ba Jin's 1961 reportage *Reunion* on the Korean War. Dispatched by Beijing to the Korean theater in the early 1950s, Ba Jin in a first-person narrative tells the story of a Party Secretary, Director Wang, spotting among the People's Volunteer Army (PVA) at the Korean War his long-lost daughter Wang Fang. (The PVA from China included Mao's eldest son Mao Anying, who was killed by American bombing in 1950.) Over a decade ago, Director Wang was forced to entrust his young daughter to a janitor in order to join the communist underground activities in Shanghai. Personal sacrifice of the father and the daughter comes to a tear-jerking happy ending as they are reunited in the Korean theater of war to entertain Chinese theatergoers. The film version juxtaposes this family reunion with a People's Liberation Army martyr's self-immolation for the sake of the collective family of China and North Korea. The martyr happens to be Wang Fang's adoptive brother who radios the artillery what has become a catchphrase "For victory, fire at me!", as he has inserted himself amidst the phalanx of American invaders. His last words ricochet from the 1964 black-and-white footage to Zhang's 2021 film, which, in reverse shots, captures the villagers' eyes welling up. Zhang's "quotations" of an old film elicit villagers' tears and perhaps our sneers. One father finds his daughter, who in turn loses her adoptive brother, who in turn is apotheosized in communist pantheon, who in turn is almost an object of ridicule to millennial China weaned on "socialism with Chinese characteristics," a.k.a.,

wolfish capitalism in good communist lamb's clothes. The early Ba Jin found repulsive traditional families, such as in the celebrated *The Torrents Trilogy* that opened with *The Family* (1933); the late Ba Jin mellowed to sing of revolutionary families.

This play on reversals of past and present, of resentment and reform, infuses the film, an ironic gallows humor that insulates the absurd horror, the horrible absurdity, of the Cultural Revolution. Zhang and Liu put on an act of estranged father and daughter when they are picked up consecutively along a desolate road by an unwitting truck driver, each blaming the other for having abandoned the family. With the driver playing the fool, this skit in the truck cab amounts to verbal and physical commedia dell'arte. The audience laugh through tears, bracing themselves against the bleak desert landscape and ceaseless human betrayals. The funnyman Fan Wei's tour de force as Fan Movie also sustains the comic streak throughout, a harmonic relaxing to counterpoint the contraction over father-daughter relationships and of our hearts.

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