

Yilei Yuan

Zhejiang International Studies University / PR China

Politeness in subtitling: To retain or not to

ABSTRACT

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This paper explores how politeness-related terms in Chinese films are translated into English with a case study that consists of four of Zhang Yimou's films. Zhang Yimou is allegedly the most internationally acclaimed Chinese director. The selected films are set in different time periods of China, and thus politeness is manifested with different focuses. Politeness in the films follows two maxims: Address Maxim and Self-denigration Maxim. Hence, this paper will examine how those politeness-related terms fall into address and self-denigration divisions and how they have been translated by subtitlers. As visual politeness is prevalent in audiovisual productions, this paper will also briefly analyse how Chinese politeness is demonstrated non-verbally.

Keywords: politeness, address, self-denigration, non-verbal politeness.

For thousands of years, China has maintained a tradition of politeness. Over 100 idioms about polite concepts and traditions exist in Chinese vocabulary, while relevant anecdotes and proverbs are numerous (Wang et al. 2007). Politeness is shown in practically every Chinese film. Zhang Yimou is allegedly the most internationally acclaimed Chinese filmmaker whose films have won international success. Four of his films will be introduced and analysed here, which are *To Live* (1994), *Hero* (2002), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) and *The Flowers of War* (2011). *To Live* is a film featuring an ordinary Chinese family's difficult life over 30 years in the midst of historical tumult and instability from the 1940s to the 1970s. The story of *Hero*, by contrast, occurs in the ancient Warring States

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period (c. 476/453/403–221 BC). A warrior's story of attempting to assassinate a king is told. *Curse of the Golden Flower*, adapted from a contemporary Chinese drama, portrays a fictionalised story of conflicts and cruelty in the royal family in 928 AD during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960). *The Flowers of War* is about prostitutes saving teenage convent girls during the Nanjing Massacre (December 1937 – January 1938). The four films show China in different historical periods; in each of them, politeness is revealed with a different focus. Three of them use a large number of address terms like kinship terms or work-related titles, while all four embrace self-denigration as an aspect of politeness. This paper will investigate how the politeness-related terms are translated in the English versions of the films, or whether the terms are translated or not. As politeness is also visually portrayed in the films, this paper will also briefly explain how politeness is depicted visually. Two versions of English subtitles of *Hero* will be involved; one version is from the DVD released by Buena Vista Home Entertainment in 2005, while the other is available at <http://subsmax.com/subtitles-movie/hero-2002/ni>.

1. Address terms

Gu (cited in Gu 1990) proposes seven politeness maxims with reference to Leech's (1983: 132) Politeness Principle, among which is the Address Maxim. This maxim means to “address your interlocutor with an appropriate term” based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth (Gu 1990: 248). Kinship address is one of the most obvious types of address in Chinese politeness. Kinship address is a vital part of daily discourse for the Chinese, as children are taught by their parents and other relatives to address people with appropriate terms from a young age. The extensive system of Chinese kinship terms manifests intricate family structures and relationships, which enabled ancient China to maintain a stable social structure and hierarchy (Wang 2007).

1.1 Royal kinship address

Specific address words which were distinct from average people's kinship terms nowadays or in the past were exclusive to the royal family. Nobody except royal members were permitted to use those terms, otherwise people could risk their lives using a word reserved for the supreme family. *Modernisation* is a major strategy of coping with archaic terms like royal kinship address terms that might have no equivalents in English.

In Example (1) from *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the emperor unexpectedly directs his royal escort to an official inn where his second son Prince Jai lives. He has been expelled from the palace as a punishment. Upon meeting his father, Jai greets him:

(1)

Mandarin Transcription (MT): 父王御驾亲临 儿臣不胜惶恐**Pinyin Pronunciation (PP):** fùwáng yù jià qínlín, érchén bú shèng huángkǒng.**English Subtitle (EN):** I am honored by Father's personal visit.

“父王” (fùwáng) literally means “father emperor” or rather “emperor father” and is exclusively used by princes and princesses. In comparison, princes refer to themselves as “儿臣” (érchén), or “courtier son”, though princes did not necessarily have a position in the court. “驾” (jià) is a kind of chariot pulled by six horses which is again entitled only to the emperor (Lü et al. 1996: 610). “The emperor’s chariot is pulled by six horses, vassals five, ministers four, higher scholarly officials three, scholarly officials two, common people one” (cited in Lü et al. 1996: 610, translated by myself). This tradition dates from the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1200–256 BC) or even earlier. “御” (yù) in the original subtitle is “royal” (Lü et al. 1996: 1544), so “御驾” is the “emperor’s royal chariot”. The prince politely says “the emperor father’s royal chariot visits personally and your courtier son is overwhelmed”. 儿臣 which Jai uses to call himself is altered into “I” in the English subtitle. On the other hand, the acting also demonstrates politeness between the royal father and son, as Jai folds his two fists and bows to the emperor, which is an ancient way of paying tribute. When the emperor enters the room, Jai takes the same action and kneels over on one knee, which is a more polite gesture.

In Example (2), Jai moves back to the palace where he approaches his elder brother Crown Prince Wan’s house, when his younger brother Prince Yu happens to be present too. Upon seeing Wan, Jai greets him:

(2)

MT: 元杰参见王兄**PP:** yuánjié cānjiàn wángxiōng.**EN:** Jai bows to his First Brother, the Crown Prince Wan.

The striking feature of this English subtitle is that its length is more than twice of the source. Literally, the source line is “Jai bows to the elder royal brother.” “王兄” (wángxiōng) means “elder royal brother” which is translated into “First Brother”. Besides, the source does not mention “Crown Prince” or his name, since the Chinese hereditary system tends to make the first-born son the Crown Prince. Subtitle readers will grasp that the first brother is the Crown Prince in later sequences too. Also, it used to be impolite for a younger brother to call an elder one by his name. Therefore, we might say that an unnecessary addition strategy is adopted in English, as an extra burden of reading is imposed on subtitle readers. Interestingly, the English subtitle also shows Jai’s different respectful gesture towards the Crown Prince from that to the emperor. Jai kneels down for the emperor, but bows for his elder brother.

1.2 Extended kinship address

Throughout history, kinship terms are widely used to address people of a specific network. In modern times, these terms have even more extended and generalised use (Gu 1990: 250). In politeness theory, an unavoidable part of interaction is face-threatening acts (FTA), so in communication, people's major concern is to preserve their own face (Goffman 1981). However, in general Chinese polite practice, more significance is attached to saving the interlocutor's face. While interacting with people, a number of face-threatening acts may occur and politeness strategies that mitigate such situations are necessary. The relative authority/social status/power of people in a conversation and distance between them has to be considered in these strategies (Gartzonika and Serban 2009: 242).

In Example (3) from *The Flowers of War*, the convent students are coerced to sing in a Japanese army's celebration where they will probably be inhumanely violated by officers and soldiers, so they are determined to jump off the drum tower to save their dignity. Example (3) reveals that John the American mortician disguised as a priest as well as the prostitutes try very hard to urge them to abandon the suicidal idea:

(3)

MT: 小妹妹你不要胡闹了!

PP: xiǎomèimei nǐ búyào húnào le!

EN: Don't do anything foolish!

“小妹妹” (xiǎomèimei, little sister) is an extended kin term that can signal solidarity and familiarity (Pan and Kadar 2011: 1534). Adopting the term in this situation is to persuade the addressee (s) into taking an action or not to. Another situation in the same film portrays a prostitute fawning over a student to access their bathroom where she also addresses her as “小妹妹 (little sister)” to declare familiarity. Nonetheless, the girl denies her polite effort, refuting “哪个是你妹妹? (Don't call me sister!)” Her response reveals that an addressee will reject a signal of solidarity or familiarity if they are reluctant to accept the speaker's demand. As the prostitute's politeness demonstration prepares for the girl's rejection of the polite approach in the next subtitle, that “little sister” is actually subtitled in English. The significance of the extended kinship in the current example may have been doubted, so “little sister” suffers from omission. Nevertheless, persuading someone to avoid a self-destructive action is much more important than that of gaining entrance to a bathroom. Hence, this “little sister” may have to be retained in the English subtitle.

In Example (4), after the prostitute Mo suggests going to the Japanese celebration for Shu the leader of the students, her colleagues echo the suggestion to take the girls down from the high balcony of the drum tower, and promise them:

(4)

MT: 要杀要剐姐姐们挡着**PP:** yào shā yào guā jiějiemen dǎngzhe.**EN:** We will protect you.

A literal translation of this example will be “(If they) want to kill (you), big sisters will defend you.” “剐” (guǎ) is an extreme ancient death punishment. The ladies call themselves “big sisters” to win trust and exhort the girls to stop their attempt. They reduce the relational distance between the girls and themselves, similar to “little sister” in the previous subtitle. At the end of the film, Shu, the student leader, regrets her previous inappropriate attitude towards Mo and addresses her as “big sister”, which dramatically symbolises her recognition of Mo’s kindness and generosity. Thus, Shu’s “big sister”, supposed to mean more in relation to her change of attitude, is translated into English by the subtitler, whereas that in the subtitle (4) is replaced by “we”. This kinship term may have to be retained, which will help target language audiences understand why Shu’s later address of Mo as “big sister” has a deeper meaning.

In Example (5) from *To Live*, after an arranged appointment, Erxi and Fengxia are willing to marry each other. Erxi politely asks Fengxia’s parents Jiazhen and Fugui for permission:

(5)

MT: 我跟凤霞的事二老还有什么意见?**PP:** wǒ gēn fèngxiá de shì èrlǎo hái yǒu shénme yìjiàn?**EN:** What do you think about Fengxia and me?

The literal meaning is “What do you two think of the marriage between Fengxia and me?” “二老” (èrlǎo), meaning “two elderly people”, always implies parents. As Erxi is asking Fengxia’s parents for permission to marry their daughter, he adopts this politeness kin address to claim familiarity and closeness. This use of kin address for a non-kin relationship operates as a *keqi* (politeness) strategy (Feng 2011: 56). Even though the kin term might not be translated literally, the English subtitle could convey the deference encoded in the kin address more adequately through rendering the request more explicitly, like “Would you allow me to marry Fengxia?”

1.3 Occupational address

Most Chinese occupational titles can serve as polite address terms, although their English equivalents have not necessarily the same usage (Gu 1990: 250). A typical example will be “王老师” which means Teacher Wang, though the family name always comes before the title like “Wang Teacher”. Furthermore, certain titles are also employed as occupational address terms on their own, such as “老师” (teacher), “教授” (professor), “局长” (bureau director), “医生” (medical doctor)

and “师傅” (skillful worker). This section will analyse how some examples of occupational address terms are translated, or whether they are omitted or retained.

In Example (6) from *To Live*, Fugui and Jiazhen are discussing the potential son-in-law Erxi with whom they are not familiar, and imagine he is vandalising their house. Fugui realises that:

(6)

MT: 没听镇长说他是组织头头

PP: méi tīng zhènzhǎng shuō tā shì ge zǔzhī tóutou.

EN: Mr. Niu said he was a Red Guard.

“镇长” (zhènzhǎng) is a mayor of a borough, which is a governmental as well as an occupational title. The title alone, without any family name, is already a polite address term. The subtitler omits his title but simplifies it into the functionally proper “Mr Niu” to show people’s respect to him. “Mayor” can possibly be another choice that lays an emphasis on Mr Niu’s occupation and his support of Fugui’s family with the advantage of his position.

Example (7) demonstrates that during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Mr Niu is taken down as a capitalist from his post, which astounds Fugui and Jiazhen, as he has cared for their family for over two decades. Noticing his forced smile and his wife crying, Fugui comforts him:

(7)

MT: 镇长您把心放宽多保重

PP: zhènzhǎng, nín bǎ xīn fàngkuān, duō bǎozhòng.

EN: Niu, don’t let it get to you. Take care!

The inappropriateness of the English version is the omission of “Mr” contrasting to “Mr Niu” before. In Chinese, Fugui still addresses him as “mayor” as in previous sequences, which manifests their unchanged respect and gratitude to him despite the social tumult and the loss of his governmental position. Nonetheless, the subtitler disregards Fugui’s unchanged attitude towards Niu and manipulates the title address term into simply his family name, which infers a non-existent changed notion towards Niu’s reduced social status. Hence, the English subtitle seems to attempt to mislead subtitle readers about Fugui’s true feeling. “Mr” should be retained in this case to make Fugui’s attitude consistent. On the other hand, politeness is also culture-based, as words and phrases deemed impolite in one culture may not be face-threatening in another (Gartzonika and Serban 2009: 242). Similarly, first name terms, a common way of address, can be impolite or not polite enough in another culture. The inconsistency in this address can be noticed by an observant subtitle reader. It might occur to them that there is a change of honorific.

In Example (8) from *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Prince Jai is appointed by the emperor as the Commanding Officer of the Chrysanthemum Festival night who will guard the palaces of the emperor's wives. On this night, Jai commands the guarding soldiers to enjoy a feast, while he keeps the palaces under surveillance instead. The head soldier receives Jai's order and extends their gratitude on behalf:

(8)

MT: 末将得令 拜谢执令官

PP: mòjiàng dé lìng, bàixiè zhílingguān.

EN: Orders received. We thank our gracious Prince.

“执令官” (zhílingguān) is literally “commanding officer”, which is an ancient occupational title serving as a polite address without a family name. The English subtitle alters the source address term into “gracious Prince”. The simplification of politeness explicates the identity of the commanding officer, when the prince is standing right beside the head soldier and a previous sequence also shows how Jai has been appointed. Therefore, it is not highly necessary to emphasise that the prince is the commanding officer in this subtitle. A suggestion for the subtitle might be “Orders received. We thank the Commanding Officer”. The occupational address in this section has all been altered, which is acceptable. Yet, consistency has to be maintained if an address term appears more than once, so that there will be no attitudinal changes that contradict the filmic context.

2. Self-denigration

Apart from the Address Maxim explained in the previous section, Gu has also proposed the Self-denigration Maxim. This section will illustrate the phenomenon of self-denigration with examples from the films mentioned before. Gu's Self-denigration Maxim comprises “two clauses or submaxims: (a) denigrate self and (b) elevate other” and this maxim “absorbs the notions of respectfulness and modesty” (Gu 1990: 246). Breaching the two submaxims by denigrating the other or elevating oneself is perceived as being impolite, rude, arrogant or boasting (ibid.). The concepts of “self” and “other” extend to physical conditions, mental states, properties, values, attitudes, writing, spouse, family, relatives, etc., that constitute the sphere of self or other (ibid.). However, the extensive concept of self or other is not intrinsically politeness-sensitive *per se*, but the acts of self-referring and other-referring is. The self-referring and other-referring acts are responsible for the denigrative and elevative use of expressions to be examined below. Also, the difference between self-denigration and other elevation in ancient China was much more conspicuous than in modern China (Gu 1990: 247), and self-denigration in contemporary times and in the past encompasses distinct vocabularies.

At the beginning of *To Live*, Fugui has been constantly gambling and the accountant informs Fugui of his one more loss in Example (9):

(9)

MT: 福贵少爷 您又输了

PP: fúguì shàoye, nín yòu shūle.

EN: You've lost again.

The accountant addresses him as “少爷” (shàoye) which is “young master”, as Fugui's family is rich and owns a huge house craved by the winner Longer. Both the accountant and the winner flatter him so as to entice him to continue gambling and ultimately lose his house. The other-elevating strategy implies the plot behind the polite remarks. Yet, the pronoun “you” can be applicable in any situation, which is not specific enough. Therefore, the English subtitle may have to add “master” or “young master” or “Master Fugui” as in the original instead of total omission or domestication. As the difference between self-denigration and other-elevation in ancient China is much more evident, some archaic terms will sound overly denigrating or elevating nowadays (Gu 1990: 247). As the social system has changed, terms like 少爷 do not apply to the current Chinese society any more.

In Example (10) from *Hero*, Nameless declares his request for Broken Sword's calligraphy in order to fulfil his deceased father's dying wish:

(10)

MT: 先父临终留下遗愿 求贵馆一份墨宝

PP: xiānfù línzhōng liúxià yíyuàn, qiú guìguǎn yífèn mòbǎo.

EN1: My father's dying wish was to acquire a scroll from your prestigious school.

EN2: My father's dying wish was for one of your scrolls

The meaning of the adjective “贵” (guì) is “your prestigious” that shows the speaker's respect towards the interlocutor. This other-elevation expression of politeness is still in use in modern days, although it sounds evidently literary and old-fashioned. “贵姓” (your prestigious family name), “贵校” (your prestigious school) and “贵方” (your prestigious party) still appear in formal discourses and documents. More interestingly, “墨宝” (mòbǎo) is also an addressee-elevating term owing to its literal meaning – “ink treasure”. This Chinese phrase is utilized to refer to the addressee's excellent calligraphy work. It is deemed as highly self-conceited and inappropriate to use the phrase on oneself. Because of the non-existence of an equivalent usage in English, “墨宝” has to be simplified, but “your prestigious school” in the first translation can manifest enough respect from Nameless to the school. By contrast, the second translation shows no apparent politeness. Compliments are a type of politeness that are heavily affected by a text reduction process during subtitling, as they belong to the realm of expressivity but do not carry strictly factual information (Bruti 2009: 230).

The obliteration of complimenting politeness in this example is assumed to be due to the lack of significance of interpersonal and textual cues over an entire film (ibid.).

After his rank increases, the imperial doctor in *Curse of the Golden Flower* travels to the city that he has been assigned to govern, bringing his daughter Chan, the empress's maid. Chan was secretly visited by her lover, the Crown Prince, which happens to be discovered by her mother. The doctor, who is long aware of their relationship, introduces her to the prince in Example (11) below:

(11)

MT: 太子殿下 这是贱内

PP: tàizǐ diànxia, zhèshì jiànnèi.

EN: Your Highness, may I present my wife.

“殿下” (diànxia) is a royal address term for the emperor's family members, literally meaning “(people) under palace doorsteps”, which indicates that people could only talk to the interlocutor below the steps of their palaces. In different dynasties, the term refers to different members, including princes, the empress and the empress dowager. “Your Highness” is an appropriate replacement for this other-elevating address. “贱内” (jiànnèi), which means “humble wife”, is an obsolescent usage to refer to one's wife. This use is extremely self-denigrating, as it is in fact denigrating the wife in order to humble the speaker himself. Thus, it is presumably correct for the subtitler to omit this term which has no equivalent in English.

3 Non-verbal politeness

Politeness is often manifested non-verbally in Zhang Yimou's films. As polite gestures or body language are more common in films that portray the ancient times than those that are set in modern times, *Hero* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* demonstrate more polite body language than *To Live* and *The Flowers of War*. In *Hero*, since Nameless' entry into the palace, he has been kneeling before the King (see Fig. 1). He is awarded for annihilating the assassin Sky with land and gold as well as the right to drink with the King. After his elimination of two more assassins – Broken Sword and Flying Snow – is announced, he is awarded with more land and gold, and is permitted to get closer to the King. He advances towards the King and kneels down again (see Fig. 2). The shortened distance between Nameless and the King is revealed by the lengthened distance between him and the gate of the palace (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Kneeling is an extremely polite gesture which is much more common in the past than today. In the past, people used to kneel and kowtow to their senior relatives. Film productions and drama series often depict the prosecutor, the accused and the witness kneeling



Fig. 1: Nameless kneels down before the King.

(Executive producers: Weiping Zhang, William Kong, Shoufang Dou and Zhang Yimou;
Director: Zhang Yimou; Buena Vista Home Entertainment, DVD released in 2005.)

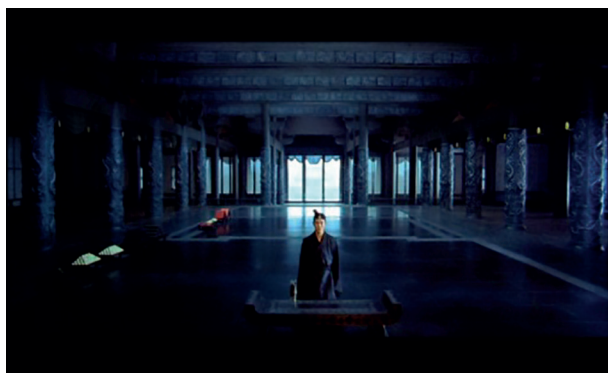


Fig. 2: Nameless advances for 10 steps and kneels down again.

(Executive producers: Weiping Zhang, William Kong, Shoufang Dou and Zhang Yimou;
Director: Zhang Yimou; Buena Vista Home Entertainment, DVD released in 2005.)

before the authorities in court too. The ultimately polite gesture is “三拜九叩” (sānbàijiǔkòu), which is to bow for three times and kowtow for nine times (Xia et al. 1999: 2052). 三拜九叩 was to show politeness to emperors or when worshipping ancestors. Kowtowing is also noticeable in *Curse of the Golden Flower*, as all three princes have to kowtow to the emperor.

Another example of ancient polite body language is “拱手” (gǒngshǒu), which was used when people of the same generation or a similar class met or bid goodbye to each other. 拱手 is to half-fold two hands (Xia et al. 1999: 1962) and often bow gently at the same time. In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, there is one scene where the second prince Jai returns to the royal palace and meets his two brothers. Jai bows to his elder brother, Crown Prince Wan, and 拱手 at the same

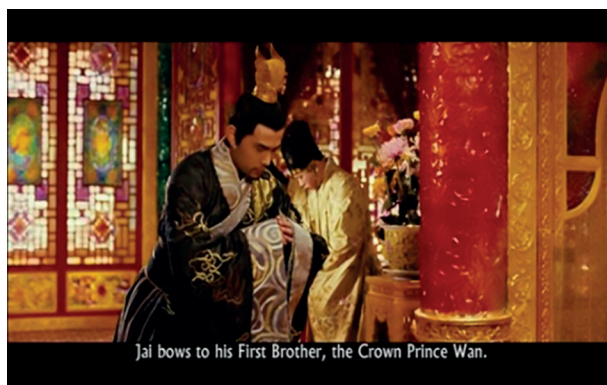


Fig. 3: Jai bows to Crown Prince Wan.

(Executive producers: William Kong and Weiping Zhang; Director: Zhang Yimou; Universal Pictures Video, DVD released in 2007.)

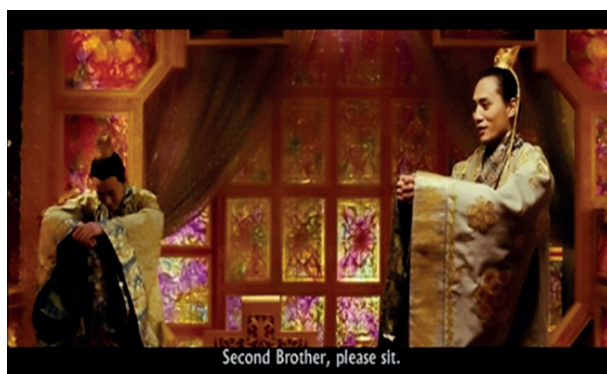


Fig. 4: Wan and Yu greet Jai.

(Executive producers: William Kong and Weiping Zhang; Director: Zhang Yimou; Universal Pictures Video, DVD released in 2007.)

time (see Fig. 3). Meanwhile, Jai's younger brother Yu shows a similar polite body language to Jai (see Fig. 4). If we have a closer look at Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, we will notice that Jai and Yu bow to a similar angle, whereas Wan almost stands still. Yu also lifts his arms higher than Jai does. The reason is probably that Wan is the oldest brother and the Crown Prince, superior to his two brothers. Therefore, standing up and half-folding his hands demonstrate enough politeness to Jai. These politeness gestures assist subtitle readers in understanding the politeness that the inferior needed to demonstrate to the superior.

According to Goffman,

The acts or events, that is, the sign-vehicles or tokens which carry ceremonial messages, are remarkably various in character. They may be [...] gestural, as when the

physical bearing of an individual conveys insolence or obsequiousness; spatial, as when an individual precedes another through the door, or sits on his right instead of his left Goffman (1967: 477).

In ancient China, left was a higher position than right, so the official who stood to the left of a king had a higher position than the official on the right. The idiom “虚左以待” (xūzuǒyǐdài) means to vacate the seat on the left while waiting for the respected guest (Xia et al. 1999: 5256), which is from the story of the ancient statesman and military strategist Xin ling jun (信陵君) (? – c. 243 BC) recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》, shǐjì) written by the great historian Sima Qian (司马迁). In Fig. 4, we can see Wan stands to the left of Yu, because Wan has been sitting to Yu's left, until Jai appears. After the three brothers politely greet each other, Yu gives his seat to Jai, while he stands up and Jai sits to the right of Wan. During the whole scene, Wan has been sitting or standing on the left, because left is the superior side. Polite gestures can probably be understood universally, even if subtitle readers may not be familiar with common Chinese polite traditions. Non-verbal information tends to be transmitted more smoothly than verbal information. More importantly, non-verbal polite body language serves to compensate for the verbal politeness that is unfortunately lost in translation sometimes. Whenever audiences see a bow, kneeling and kowtowing in films set in ancient China, they will presumably apprehend the polite attitude from those gestures immediately, no matter where they are from.

On the other hand, non-verbal politeness can be juxtaposed with fansubbers' subtitling procedures, where they employ cultural and genre knowledge along with technological expertise with a view to provide an in-depth viewing experience (O'Hagan 2008: 178–179). This is typically presented in their explanatory techniques: explanatory notes, which tend to appear in the same font or style as normal subtitles, and textual inserts, which are often seen with flexible design and positioning (Wang 2017: 177–178). According to the author's experience, in the subtitling industry of online TV, it is often acknowledged that subtitles are frequently placed in the lower 1/3 of the screen or occasionally on top. Therefore, textual inserts from fansubbing practice, which can appear in the middle 1/3 of the screen or even near characters, seem to be intrusive and distracting. Nonetheless, these days, Chinese films sometimes place texts that explain location or time in the middle 1/3 of the screen, while Chinese TV series has a long history of inserting texts that introduce characters' names right beside the characters themselves. Therefore, textual inserts might be applicable in handling non-verbal politeness when it is not self-explanatory but may affect plot understanding. Explanatory notes that often appear in brackets might also be applied to explain non-verbal politeness when necessary, although it is not a common practice in cinema released films.

4 Conclusion

This paper has investigated specificities of politeness in subtitling from Chinese into English, with representative examples from four films of Zhang Yimou. On the basis of Gu's (1990: 245–252) Address Maxim and Self-denigration Maxim, politeness strategies have been categorised into address terms and self-denigration terms, which may overlap. Address terms were further divided into kinship terms and occupational titles. Certain forms of kinship address have to be simplified, while other forms of address are unnecessarily domesticated and omitted in those films. Even if particular kinship terms do not have equivalents in English, a compensating strategy can be adopted to reproduce the polite attitude. Self-denigration was mainly analysed from contemporary and ancient perspectives; it is essential to subtitle ancient denigrative or elevative terms using a modernization strategy. In a nutshell, particular politeness terms lack equivalents in English, which can be handled by means of simplification, modernisation or compensation strategies; other terms indeed bear similarity to relevant usages in English, and thus the source Chinese terms have to be transferred into English accordingly. Consistency has to be maintained while subtitling politeness, especially if particular terms constantly appear in a film.

To watch a film from a foreign country is also to observe and interpret a fairly unfamiliar culture. Politeness is an inextricable part of a culture and society. Although polite address terms may not be vital cues for the plot, they have prominent social functions in the source culture. While watching a foreign film, we usually do not intentionally pay attention to the politeness of the original culture. However, we more often than not notice politeness habits which are different from those of our own. This is especially true regarding cultural differences as evident as those between China and many other countries. When politeness is represented in the dialogue of a source film, there may be no equivalent address terms or similar usages in the target language. And yet, when there are equivalent terms that produce a similar polite attitude, target language subtitles should not attempt to domesticate or omit the politeness in the dialogue. Occasionally, politeness address terms might have significant contextual implications, as an extra polite term can indicate a change of attitude. Imagine that two men are on first-name terms, but one suddenly starts to call the other “Mr...” It is very likely that something that has happened makes their relationship less close. This example is not very different from the one from *The Flowers of War* where the student Shu finally acknowledges Mo's kindness and calls her “big sister”. This paper has not intended to maintain that every single example of verbal politeness in a source film should be recreated in the target language, but a subtitler could at least try to find words or phrases that functionally display a similar level of polite attitude as in the source dialogue.

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Yilei Yuan

Zhejiang International Studies University
 School of Applied Foreign Languages
 299 Liuhe Rd, Xihu District, Hangzhou
 Zhejiang Province, PR China, 310023
 yileiyuan@zisu.edu.cn