CHAPTER THREE

ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATION:
PERFORMATIVITY IN DUBBING FILMS IN LOCAL LANGUAGES

Introduction

A new phenomenon in broadcast television that became very popular in the 2000s is the dubbing of films into local languages. A wide variety of sources—silent films and talking pictures, foreign and domestic movies, classics and standard fare—were redubbed. In most cases, the dubbed version arranges selected clips from the original film in a new order and replaces the original soundtrack with new dialogue rendered in local languages. Examples abound: Charlie Chaplin speaks the Yunnan Mandarin variety of Luliang 陆良 County in an entertainment show that ran in Yunnan Kunming TV in 1996. In a series of VCDs aired on many Sichuan local TV stations in 2000, Jane Eyre, speaking Zhongjiang 中江 Mandarin, asks Rochester about the previous night, and he responds in Chengdu Mandarin that he lost big (xibe 洗白) playing mahjong. Besides the foreign classics, the series also included episodes from famous domestic films such as the 1955 revolutionary feature Guerrillas on the Plain (Pingyuan youjiedui 平原游击队) and the 1984 martial-arts comedy Kids from Shaolin (Shao­lin xiaozizi 少林小子); in both cases, the dialect versions largely repeat the original lines in Sichuan Mandarin. This trend took off nationally in 2004 with redubbings of the American cartoon classic Tom and Jerry (Mao he Laoshu 猫和老鼠 in Putonghua); by 2005, approximately seventeen local-language versions had appeared nationwide. Tom the cat and Jerry the mouse were given local names such as laopi 老皮 and suizi’r 碎子儿 in the Shaanxi Mandarin version, ergazi 二尕子 and xiaobudian’r 小不点 in the Northeast Mandarin version, maodatou 猫大头 and shuyaya 鼠丫丫 in the Beijing Mandarin version, laonaodan 老孬蛋 and xiaojingdou 小精豆 in the Henan Mandarin version, hantoumao 憨头猫 and xiao

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1 Replacing a foreign movie’s soundtrack is a well-known device for achieving a comic effect. For example, Woody Allen’s film What’s Up, Tiger Lily? transforms the Japanese spy film Kagi no kagi (Key of keys) into a comedy with a completely different plot.

2 The original Tom and Jerry cartoons were produced by Fred Quimby for MGM in the 1940s.
jin’guaixü 小精怪 in the Hubei Mandarin version, and loryoedio 老油条 and siortzinkua 小精怪 in the Shanghai Wu version, to name a few. Already in 2004, local TV stations were launching new shows that featured films dubbed into local languages. In Shandong TV’s Fresh Air from Drama (Ju lai feng 剧来风, 2004), the German officer in La Grande Vadrouille responds to the nun in Jinan Mandarin: “Just had an egg bun with a Shandong-style sweet sauce. Awesome!” 吃了个鸡蛋包弄了碗甜沫, 杠赛了!). In a redubbed version of the 2001 comedy Big Shot’s Funeral (Dawan 大腕), the funeral ceremony of the internationally renowned film director Don Tyler is set to take place in the Temple of Confucius in Shandong. Chosen as the overture for the ceremony is a famous aria from Puccini’s opera Turandot, “No one shall sleep tonight” (图兰朵: 今晚无法入眠), sung in Putonghua. In Jinan Mandarin, the original Italian title of the aria, “Nessum dorma,” becomes the colloquial phrase, “We’re not gonna sleep tonight” (今天晚上不睡觉). In Hangzhou, West Lake Pearl Channel’s Fun from Dubbed Films (Yingshi hahaha 影视哈哈哈, 2004–2006), the native Beijing actor Ge You 葛优 in Be There or Be Square (Bujianbusan 不见不散, 1998) becomes a local businessman speaking Shaoxing Keqiao 绍兴柯桥 Wu, while the Beijing-based actress Xu Fan 徐帆 turns into a school teacher in Hangzhou. Similarly, in the dubbed Hong Kong movie Only Fools Fall in Love (Dailao baishou 呆佬拜寿, 1995), the Hong Kong actor Liu Qingyun 刘青云, speaking Hangzhou Wu, quarrels with the Hong Kong actress Wu Qianlian 吴倩莲, who speaks Shaoxing Wu, over smelly preserved bean curd at West Lake.

To some extent, the dubbing of films into local languages can be viewed as part of a larger trend of parodying classics, allegedly ushered in by Zhou Xingchi’s A Chinese Odyssey (Dahua xiyou 大话西游, 1995). Often regarded as spoofing the classic vernacular novel Journey to the West (Xiyouji 西游记), A Chinese Odyssey epitomizes the so-called wulitou (nonsense) or dahua rhetorical style: a pastiche of discourses transcending the delimitation of time and space. Largely following John Fiske’s theory of resistant audiences, Tao Dongfeng 陶东风 points out that cynical Chinese youths’ pleasure in consuming dahua texts is derived from the parody and subversion of classic works as well as of the underlying ethical, moral, and cultural orders they convey. Although, to a degree, Tao’s explanation of the

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3 Tao Dongfeng, “Dahua wenxue yu xiaofei wenhua yujing zhong jingdian de mingyun” 大话文学与消费文化语境中经典的命运 [The Dahua literature and the fate of the classics in the context of culture consumption], Tianjin shehui kexue 3 (2005): 89–98.