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Audience Responses and Gendered Paratexts in Film Title Translation: Evidence from Chinese Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates translated film titles as ideological sites in contemporary Chinese media discourse, where gender identities are erased, objectified, misrepresented, or reclaimed. It examines how such paratextual choices trigger cultural conflict and negotiation during cross-cultural circulation. Guided by paratext theory and feminist approaches to media discourse, this study employs thematic analysis to examine how institutional translation strategies and networked audience responses jointly shape gendered meanings in translated film titles. Drawing on over 400 user-generated commentaries from three major Chinese social media platforms, Weibo (Microblog), Xiaohongshu (Red Note), and Douyin (TikTok), this study identifies four dominant patterns in public responses to film title translation. First, some translations erase feminine subjectivity through lexical omission. Second, some translations reduce female characters to objects of desire by employing sexualized or aestheticized language. Third, even when women are visible, their presence is frequently reframed within heteronormative or romanticized tropes that distort or dilute the original film's feminist or gender-critical intent. Finally, networked audiences mobilize discursive resistance by offering ironic commentary and alternative translations that foreground feminist agency and media literacy, thereby articulating vernacular strategies of cultural integration and mutual intelligibility. These findings challenge the conventional view of translation as a neutral transfer. Instead, they highlight translation's role as a publicly contested cultural act, shaped by social scrutiny and identity politics. This has important implications for intercultural communication and the management of cultural differences. The study advocates for increased attention to gendered representation in paratextual translation and supports participatory models that integrate

audience feedback as a pathway to more inclusive and equitable cross-cultural narratives.

Keywords: Audience Reception; Cultural Conflict; Gender; Paratextual Discourse; Social Media; Translation

1. Introduction

Translated film titles occupy a crucial position in shaping how target-language audiences first encounter a film's narrative, characters, and thematic orientation. In cross-lingual circulation, official film title translation functions not only as a marketing device but also as a paratextual mechanism through which meaning is institutionally constructed prior to textual consumption, thereby mediating cultural difference at the threshold of intercultural communication. In the Chinese context, a recurring translational practice can be observed in which officially translated film titles systematically erase female subjectivity, aestheticize or sexualize female figures, and romantically reframe narratives that were originally feminist or gender-critical in intent. These practices point to the operation of institutional constructive agency, whereby official title translation actively produces and normalizes gender discourses. These translations increasingly serve as sites of public contestation, where networked audiences negotiate, challenge, and resist gender discourses through audience counter-agency. This study, therefore, asks how institutional constructive agency operates in official film title translation in China, and how audience counter-agency emerges in response within networked media environments, highlighting how these gendered translation practices intersect with intercultural communication, cultural conflict, and possibilities for cultural integration.

Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into film title translation, it has not yet offered an adequate account of how gender discourses are produced through institutional constructive agency and publicly contested through audience counter-agency within the paratextual space of film titles, especially when such contestation concerns the negotiation of cultural identity and values. Research on titles and paratexts has emphasized their interpretive power in cross-cultural mediation, demonstrating how titles shape audience expectations and guide reception, and how such processes may involve intercultural negotiation and cultural tension[1–3]. Feminist translation studies, in turn, have shown how translational decisions may repro-

duce or unsettle patriarchal norms by shaping representational logics at the level of gender discourses[4,5]. However, this body of work rarely examines officially translated film titles as institutionalized translation practices endowed with constructive agency in the public sphere. At the same time, research on digital participation and audience reception has documented how networked audiences intervene in meaning-making through practices such as commentary, parody, and vernacular retranslation[6,7]. While this literature foregrounds audience agency, it seldom theorizes such interventions as forms of counter-agency specifically directed at the gender discourses embedded in official film title translation, nor does it situate these struggles within broader debates on cultural conflict and integration in mediated public life.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined gender representation in cinema, with particular attention to narrative structures, visual regimes, and media discourse surrounding femininity and masculinity[8,9]. Parallel to this, research in film translation and audiovisual translation has primarily focused on subtitling, dubbing, and modes of linguistic transfer, while film titles have been discussed mainly in relation to branding strategies, localization norms, or linguistic adaptation[10,11].

While these strands of research offer important insights into gendered media representation and film translation, respectively, they tend to treat film titles either as peripheral marketing elements or as static textual units. As a result, translated film titles are rarely examined as sites of ongoing socio-cultural negotiation, particularly with regard to how gendered meanings are publicly contested, reframed, or resisted by audiences in digital environments. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how gender discourse operates at the paratextual level in transnational media circulation, which this study seeks to address.

Addressing this gap carries significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, by conceptualizing official film title translation as a form of institutional constructive agency, this study extends translation research on gender discourses into a paratextual domain where gender visibility, market imperatives, and discursive normalization converge.

It advances understanding of how gender discourses are institutionally established at the earliest stage of cross-cultural circulation, prior to audience engagement with the primary text. At the same time, by foregrounding audience counter-agency, the study contributes to digital audience research by examining how ordinary social media users actively negotiate, challenge, and resist institutionally produced gender discourses within participatory online environments. Practically, because film titles play a decisive role in shaping how films are framed, promoted, and publicly discussed, the gender discourses constructed through institutional constructive agency in title translation reinforce stereotypes or marginalize feminist and gender-critical narratives before viewing occurs. Clarifying how audience counter-agency operates in response is therefore essential for informing gender-sensitive translation and localization practices and for understanding the broader cultural consequences of paratextual mediation. From the perspective of cultural conflict and integration, these dynamics show how paratextual translation can become a public arena for negotiating cultural identity, value differences, and resolution strategies.

To address this research question, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on user-generated discourse from major Chinese social media platforms, including Weibo (Microblog), Xiaohongshu (Red Note), and Douyin (Tik-Tok), focusing on public discussions surrounding officially translated film titles. The analysis examines how audience counter-agency is discursively articulated in response to the gender discourses produced by institutional constructive agency in official film title translation. By juxtaposing official title translations with audience-generated alternatives and commentaries, the study explores the dynamic interplay between institutional constructive agency and audience counter-agency within China's networked media environment. In doing so, the study treats audience comments as traces of intercultural meaning negotiation, showing how cultural tensions are articulated and partially integrated through everyday digital talk.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing scholarship on paratexts, gender and translation, and digital audience participation, situating this study within these intersecting debates. This is followed by a methodology section outlining the data sources and analytical procedures. The findings section presents recurrent patterns in how audience counter-agency responds to gender discourses produced through institutional constructive agency in official film title translation. The discussion then examines the implications of these dynamics for translation agencies and the gender politics of paratextual mediation.

2. Literature Review

Translated film titles have long been recognized as key sites where intercultural meaning is not only shaped but also institutionally mediated. Rather than functioning merely as labels, film titles operate as paratextual cues that pre-structure reception by shaping genre expectations, signaling narrative tone, and mediating cultural assumptions before a film is viewed[1]. Existing scholarship has primarily examined translated film titles through strategic lenses, emphasizing practices such as domestication, foreignization, and market-oriented rewriting as means of negotiating linguistic distance and commercial imperatives[2,3]. While these studies provide valuable insights into the communicative and economic functions of titles, they largely treat them as technical or promotional instruments. Consequently, existing scholarship has given limited attention to the ideological and representational implications of translated film titles in framing characters and relationships, with a particular gap in studies addressing gender. In cross-cultural circulation, such paratextual decisions can precipitate cultural conflict when imported narratives meet local norms, while also functioning as a selective mechanism of cultural integration when meanings are reframed for mutual intelligibility.

Although translation studies increasingly acknowledge the politics of representation, research has paid limited attention to how translated film titles function as sites for the construction and distortion of gender discourses. Feminist translation scholars have demonstrated that translation practices may reinforce or resist patriarchal norms as a dominant form of gender discourses[4,5], yet these insights are seldom applied to paratextual domains, where ideological framing is particularly concentrated and publicly visible. Film translation scholarship has largely overlooked translated film titles, which remain among the most accessible and widely circulated components of translation and are still under-theorized. Furthermore, previous studies suggest that commercially oriented title localization often involves strategic discursive

choices aimed at enhancing market appeal and audience accessibility within popular media industries[9,12]. These tendencies point to a broader structural issue, in which gender is routinely treated as a flexible resource for commercial circulation rather than as a dimension requiring sustained ethical and analytical scrutiny. Consequently, despite growing attention to translation and gender in adjacent research domains, the gender discourses encoded in translated film titles remain conceptually acknowledged but empirically undertreated. This gap matters for understanding how gendered title translation mediates cultural difference and cultural identity in transnational media flows.

In parallel, a growing body of research in media and communication studies has examined gender as a discursive construct shaped and circulated through contemporary media environments, particularly in Chinese and East Asian contexts. Recent studies have highlighted how media texts and their surrounding discourses participate in the normalization, negotiation, and contestation of gender norms, drawing attention to the role of public communication, audience interpretation, and platform dynamics in shaping gendered meanings[13,14]. This line of research conceptualizes gender not merely as a representational issue but as a form of media discourse embedded in broader cultural, ideological, and institutional structures. However, despite this expanding scholarship, translated film titles remain largely absent from discussions of gender and media discourse. As highly visible and widely circulated paratextual elements, film titles play a crucial role in framing narratives and guiding audience interpretation, yet their gendered implications have rarely been examined within media discourse frameworks. By focusing on translated film titles as sites of gendered media discourse, this study bridges translation studies and media discourse analysis, responding to calls for more integrated approaches to gender, media, and cultural negotiation.

The rise of participatory digital media further complicates and enriches the landscape of officially translated film titles. Here, ordinary digital audiences refer to individual users who actively engage with and reinterpret these titles on social media platforms, complementing the concept of networked audiences introduced in the Introduction. Research on digital culture and translation demonstrates that social media platforms enable such users to critique, parody, or creatively reframe official translations, effectively performing translational agency[15,16]. In the Chinese context, platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu serve as dynamic arenas where users engage in semi-public acts of reinterpretation. These interactions decentralize authority by shifting translation from a specialized professional task to a distributed social practice shaped by technological affordances and collective sensibilities[17]. Crucially, this participatory environment makes visible the interpretive labour of ordinary digital audiences, through which they negotiate, challenge, and resist gender discourses embedded in the titles. Despite a growing body of research on citizen translation, little is known about how ordinary digital audiences specifically respond to officially translated film titles regarding gender discourses, nor how their commentary acts as a discursive intervention that shapes these discourses. Such interventions can be read as lay strategies for restoring cultural intelligibility and negotiating value conflict around gender in intercultural communication.

This study centers on the intersection of gender discourses in officially translated film titles and audience counter-agency, which constitutes its conceptual core and primary contribution. Existing literature largely emphasizes institutional actors, such as translators, distributors, and marketing teams, implicitly treating official translations as stable products whose ideological implications are to be decoded. What remains underexamined is how ordinary digital audiences actively participate in the ideological life of these titles: by negotiating, challenging, and resisting gender discourses embedded in the titles, offering alternative translations, or humorously reframing narratives to expose gender bias. These audience practices are not peripheral reactions; they constitute meaningful paratextual interventions that illuminate collective judgments about gender, representation, and cultural translation. Attending to these interventions reveals translation as a dynamic, relational process, in which meaning is co-constructed through both top-down institutional strategies and bottom-up audience reinterpretation. In this sense, audience counter-agency is not only translational but also integrative: it articulates bottom-up proposals for how gendered cultural meanings should travel and settle in the target public sphere.

While existing scholarship illuminates paratextual framing, gendered translation, and participatory audience practices as separate domains, it lacks an integrated framework

capable of capturing their dynamic interplay. Specifically, there is a paucity of research that systematically examines how gendered discourses are institutionally constructed in officially translated film titles and how they are simultaneously publicly contested by networked audiences within the same paratextual space. This theoretical gap limits our understanding of translation as a site of real-time cultural negotiation where conflict and integration around gender are played out.

3. Theoretical Consideration

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical traditions: paratext theory and agency-oriented approaches to translation and cultural production. To address the gap identified above, this framework treats translation not as a neutral linguistic transfer but as a socially embedded practice through which power, ideology, and gender discourses are circulated and challenged. These frameworks provide the conceptual tools for examining how gender discourses are structurally encoded in officially translated film titles and how these discourses are subsequently negotiated and contested in digital public discourse. The theoretical orientation of this study treats translation not as a neutral linguistic transfer but as a socially embedded practice through which power, ideology, and gender discourses are circulated and challenged. By bringing these traditions together, the study also foregrounds how paratextual translation can generate cultural tension and integrative rearticulation as meanings move across cultural boundaries.

Paratext theory conceptualizes film titles as threshold mechanisms. Through these titles, institutional actors shape how audiences enter, anticipate, and interpret a film even before they engage with its primary narrative. Within this framework, titles are not treated as neutral labels but as strategically positioned framing devices that actively structure expectations and delimit possible readings. This understanding was systematized in Genette's foundational work on paratexts, which established a critical distinction between primary texts and their surrounding discursive apparatuses[1]. Subsequent scholarship in translation studies has extended this perspective by demonstrating that paratextual elements are deeply implicated in ideological positioning, cultural gatekeeping, and market-oriented framing, particularly in contexts of cross-cultural circulation[2–4]. Within audiovi-

sual translation research, film titles have increasingly been recognized as privileged sites where institutional authority, cultural values, and commercial logics intersect[5,6]. In this study, paratext theory therefore functions as the structural foundation for examining officially translated film titles as institutional artefacts that pre-configure gender discourses and constrain the interpretive horizons available to audiences.

To account for social action shaping the production and contestation of gender discourses beyond textual structure, this study draws on theories of agency in translation and cultural production. Agency is understood here as a socially situated capacity to intervene in meaning-making, rather than as an individual psychological attribute[7,15]. This study, therefore, operationalizes agency along two interrelated but analytically distinct dimensions.

Institutional constructive agency designates the ways in which translators, distributors, and marketing institutions strategically produce gender discourses through officially translated film titles, under the constraints of commercial imperatives, ideological norms, and genre conventions. Through lexical choices, gender marking, aestheticization, romanticization, and narrative reframing, these institutional actors encode particular assumptions about femininity, masculinity, and desirability into officially translated film titles[16]. From this perspective, officially translated film titles are not merely linguistic outcomes but institutional products embedded within regimes of cultural power.

Institutional constructive agency refers to the capacity of institutional actors, including distributors, localization teams, and marketing institutions, to systematically construct and stabilize gendered meanings through officially sanctioned film title translation under commercial, cultural, and market constraints. Rather than centering on individual intentionality, this concept foregrounds how gender discourses are produced through routinized institutional decision-making embedded within the cultural industries.

In translation studies, translator agency typically denotes the individual translator's ethical positioning, interpretive choices, and interventions in the translation process[18]. While this perspective highlights subjectivity and responsibility at the individual level, it does not fully account for translation practices shaped by collective institutional logics that exceed the control of any single actor. Similarly, reception-oriented approaches emphasize audience agency

by examining how audiences actively interpret, resist, or appropriate mediated texts[19]. These approaches primarily address processes of meaning-making after circulation, rather than the institutional construction of ideological framings prior to public reception.

By contrast, institutional constructive agency focuses on how gendered discourses are proactively produced and normalized before audience engagement through institutional mechanisms operating within the cultural industries. This perspective resonates with Bourdieusian analyses of cultural production, which emphasize how symbolic forms are shaped by field-specific power relations and external structural constraints[20]. By foregrounding this institutional layer, the concept offers a structural account of how gender norms are embedded in translated film titles before becoming objects of public negotiation.

Audience counter-agency refers to the practices through which ordinary digital audiences actively contest and rework officially translated film titles in digital environments. Rather than treating audiences as passive recipients of institutional meanings, this study conceptualizes them as vernacular agents who engage in critique, parody, ironic reframing, and alternative translation practices. Research on participatory culture and audience reception in translation demonstrates that digital media environments enable non-professional actors to intervene in the circulation of meaning and to propose competing interpretive frames[10,17]. In this study, audience counter-agency is understood specifically as these bottom-up practices through which *these audiences* negotiate, challenge, and resist gender discourses embedded in officially translated film titles.

By integrating paratext theory with a differentiated model of agency, this study constructs a dual-layer analytical framework for understanding officially translated film titles as relational and contested sites of meaning production. Rather than treating film title translation as a unidirectional transfer of meaning, this framework foregrounds the dynamic tension between institutional constructive agency and audience counter-agency. This theoretical configuration underpins the methodological design of the study and guides the interpretive logic of the subsequent analysis. Conceptually, the model frames these interactions as a recurring cycle of cultural conflict and integration, in which official framing and audience repair jointly shape what becomes publicly

acceptable and intelligible.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in two interrelated layers of data: officially released Chinese translations of foreign film titles and audience-generated commentaries responding to these translations on major Chinese social media platforms. The analytical focus is not on films as audiovisual texts but on titles as paratextual sites where gender discourses are produced, negotiated, challenged, and resisted. Rather than treating translation as a purely linguistic act, this study conceptualizes it as a socially embedded practice shaped by institutional power and audience intervention. Analytically, the study treats these titles and comment threads as sites where cultural difference is negotiated, and where moments of conflict and integration become visible in public discourse.

In particular, this study does not aim to cover all films that address gender in their titles but rather focuses on a specific subset of films whose Chinese translations have sparked notable gender-related discussions on social media platforms in China. This focus is crucial for understanding the intersection between translation practices and public discourse in the context of gender. The 12 films selected for this study were not chosen solely based on their inclusion in a broader gender-related category, but rather based on their visibility and relevance in gender discussions within the Chinese social media environment. Thus, the selection criterion for this study emphasizes the prominence of gender-related discourse in the online conversations surrounding these films.

The case selection followed three key criteria: sustained visibility in Chinese digital discourse, relevance to gender representation (whether explicit or implicit), and diversity across genre and historical period. This approach ensures that the films selected reflect a range of gender issues in the context of Chinese cultural discussions, while also capturing different forms of institutional gender framing in the translation process.

These films were not treated as illustrative examples, but as fixed analytical anchors through which patterns of institutional constructive agency and audience counter-agency could be systematically examined. All findings presented in this article are derived exclusively from these twelve cases.

To operationalize the boundaries of the dataset and to stabilize the comparative design, the study introduces the following table (**Table 1**) as a methodological reference point rather than as interpretive evidence.

Table 1. Official vs. Audience-Reframed Film Titles in Chinese Translation.

Original Title	Official Chinese Title (with Gloss)	Audience-Suggested Titles (with Gloss)	Gender Discursive Pattern (Institutional Translation)
Young Woman and the Sea	泳者之心 (The Heart of a Swimmer)	老娘与海 (Old Lady and the Sea)	Gender Erasure
She's the Man	足球尤物 (Football Beauty)	—	Gender Erasure
Gone with the Wind	乱世佳人 (Beauty in Troubled Times)	—	Romanticization
Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter	我们的父辈 (Our Fathers)	—	Gender Erasure
Scent of a Woman	闻香识女人 (Knowing Women by Their Scent)	—	Sexualization
Legally Blonde	律政俏佳人 (Pretty Legal Girl/Legal Beauty)	粉色辩护 (Pink Defense)	Sexualization
Ocean's Eight	瞒天过海：美人计 (Beauty Trap)	姐妹局 (Sisterhood Scheme)/八个女贼 (Eight Women Thieves)	Sexualization
Cleopatra	埃及艳后 (Egyptian Beauty Queen)	—	Romanticization
Birdman	鸟人 (Bird Person)	—	Gender Erasure
The King's Speech	国王的演讲 (The King's Speech)	—	Gender Erasure
Sexy Beast	性感野兽 (Sexy Beast)	退役老炮性感归来 (Retired but Still Hot: The Old Gun Returns)	Sexualization
Charlie's Angels	霹雳娇娃 (Explosive Darlings)	—	Romanticization

Audience discourse data were purposively collected from Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin to examine how ordinary digital audiences negotiate, challenge, and resist gender discourses embedded in officially translated film titles. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify posts explicitly engaging with gender discourses in relation to these titles. Keyword combinations such as "片名翻译 + 性别" (film title translation + gender), "标题翻译 + 女性/男性" (title translation + female/male), and "电影标题 + 性别" (film title + gender) were used to retrieve relevant materials from these platforms. The inclusion criteria required that posts demonstrate evaluative or interpretive engagement with gender discourses, including references to practices such as the erasure of female subjectivity, the aestheticization or sexualization of female figures, or the romantic reframing of narratives. Commercial reposts, irrelevant discussions, and posts lacking substantive interpretive content were systematically excluded from the dataset.

The study specifically focused on those film titles that have sparked extensive gender-related discussions on Chinese social media platforms, reflecting the intensity of discourse rather than the mere association with the "gender" keyword. While many film titles are related to gender, the 12 selected titles were chosen based on the level of discourse

they have generated on these platforms, emphasizing the intensity of engagement rather than the broadness of the association with gender. These platformed discussions were treated as naturally occurring records of intercultural communication, capturing how users frame certain translations as culturally misaligned, culturally acceptable, or in need of integrative revision.

Over a continuous four-week period, 427 user-generated comments were systematically collected through screenshot capture and textual transcription to ensure data stability and auditability. The selection of these comments was not based solely on frequency or popularity but guided by the discursive relevance to gender representation and interpretive engagement. Comments were collected through purposive sampling, focusing on posts and discussion threads in which users explicitly evaluated, critiqued, or proposed alternative translations of officially released film titles. This purposive sampling strategy enabled the study to capture a nuanced spectrum of audience engagement with gendered discourses in film titles, from highly visible threads to lower-engagement discussions, thus mitigating platform algorithm bias[21]. Data collection encompassed multiple visibility levels, including highly visible threads, medium-engagement posts, and low-visibility discussions. This strategy was de-

signed to mitigate platform algorithm bias and to capture a representative spectrum of ordinary digital audiences' engagement with officially translated film titles and the gender discourses they encode. When multimedia content appeared, only the textual components directly addressing officially translated film titles and related gender discourses were retained. Official Chinese titles were obtained from verified distributor accounts, theatrical release materials, and recognized film databases. In cases where multiple title variants existed, the version used for national theatrical distribution or widely recognized in mainstream media was treated as the authoritative, officially translated film title.

Data analysis focused on systematically identifying, coding, and thematizing patterns of gender discourses in relation to officially translated film titles. This process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis, ensuring systematic coding and theme development[22]. The researcher immersed themselves in the dataset through repeated reading and memo-writing, generating initial codes that captured patterns of gender discourses and framing strategies. These codes were progressively clustered into candidate themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and finalized. Data collection and coding proceeded iteratively, and analytical saturation was considered reached when no substantively new themes related to gender discourse or audience counter-agency emerged in subsequent rounds of analysis. The analytical process was structured around two interrelated dimensions: institutional constructive agency and audience counter-agency. Institutional constructive agency was analyzed through indicators such as gender marking, erasure of female subjectivity, aestheticization or sexualization of female figures, romanticized reframing, objectifying tropes, and market-driven semantic shifts. Audience counter-agency was examined through practices including critique, parody, ironic reframing, and alternative translation practices. This dual analytical structure enabled systematic comparison between top-down translation interventions and bottom-up discursive practices, directly addressing how official translations construct gender discourses and how digital audiences negotiate, challenge, and resist these constructions. In addition to gendered framing, codes captured explicit evaluations of cultural fit and value conflict, including claims that a title betrays the source context, caters to local norms, or repairs intercultural understanding.

Reflexivity guided the research process to ensure a transparent and critically informed analysis of gender discourses. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal recording interpretive decisions, analytical uncertainties, and evolving conceptual positions. Special attention was given to the researcher's positionality as a bilingual observer across Chinese and English media environments. Reflexive practice was employed to minimize moralized readings and to prevent the imposition of contemporary gender discourses onto historically and culturally situated texts.

Ethical considerations guided the handling of user-generated data to ensure privacy and responsible research practice. The dataset was restricted to publicly accessible online materials, and all user identifiers were anonymized. User comments were treated as textual artefacts of public discourse rather than as personal statements, in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research using publicly available online data. Personal handles, profile links, and metadata were excluded, and user comments were paraphrased when necessary to prevent traceability. Where verbatim excerpts are used, they are shortened and de-identified to minimize re-identification risk. Data collection and use adhered to the publicly stated content policies of Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. No private or vulnerable populations were involved in the study. These procedures ensured that the analysis of how gender discourses are produced, negotiated, challenged, and resisted in relation to officially translated film titles was conducted ethically and responsibly. This study does not claim statistical representativeness of all Chinese audiences. Instead, it aims to identify recurring discursive patterns through which gendered meanings in translated film titles are negotiated and contested in networked public spaces.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Gender Erasure: Institutionalized De-Feminization through Constructive Agency

Gender erasure in official film title translation does not operate as a neutral stylistic simplification but as a patterned institutional practice shaped by institutional constructive agency. Rather than merely responding to linguistic constraints, this agency actively reorganizes meaning by selectively suppressing feminine markers while preserving or

stabilizing masculine ones. Apparent neutrality is therefore a systematically gendered operation embedded in market rationalities, cultural risk management, and entrenched hierarchies of narrative legitimacy[11,21].

A revealing case of gender erasure, documented in **Table 1** (Row 1), is *Young Woman and the Sea*, officially translated as *The Heart of a Swimmer*. Audience responses did not interpret this shift as accidental. Comments such as *" 'Woman' is clearly central, yet it has been erased"* explicitly indicate that viewers perceive the operation of institutional constructive agency. In this case, institutional agency functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, recoding a female-centered narrative into an abstract story of perseverance, thereby repositioning femininity as an indispensable but backgrounded element. This mechanism does not serve brevity; it constitutes strategic de-gendering, motivated by assumptions that explicitly female stories are commercially precarious or culturally limited, as observed in non-professional translation communities on Chinese online social media[23,24].

This logic becomes more visible in the German film *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (see **Table 1**, Row 4), translated as *Our Fathers*. Rather than neutralizing both genders symmetrically, institutional constructive agency performs a selective operation: the feminine term is erased, while the masculine term is preserved and elevated as the representative of collective memory. Audience responses articulate this asymmetry explicitly, asking *"Why do 'mothers' always disappear in the name of 'neutrality'?"* This case exemplifies the structural bias of institutional constructive agency. Apparent neutrality functions as a legitimized discourse that conceals a deeper hierarchy, in which masculinity is treated as universal and femininity as particular, and therefore removable, as evidenced in online reader responses to retranslations[25].

Importantly, gender erasure is not uniformly applied across all cases, highlighting its ideological character. Titles such as Birdman, rendered as Bird Person (**Table 1**, Row 9), were largely accepted by audiences, not because the operation was neutral, but because gender was not narratively central to the film's thematic architecture. In contrast, *The King's Speech* (**Table 1**, Row 10) retains explicit masculinity without eliciting similar critical scrutiny. This observed asymmetry illustrates that institutional constructive agency is not merely a technology of simplification; it is a selective technology of normalization that systematically preserves

male-coded authority while rendering female-coded specificity negotiable or expendable, as seen in user-generated translation activities on Chinese platforms[22,24].

These cases demonstrate that gender erasure operates as a form of institutional power rather than as a neutral linguistic process. Institutional constructive agency does not merely shorten or adapt titles. It actively curates which gendered subjects can appear as universal carriers of meaning and which must be suppressed to maintain marketability, ideological comfort, and cultural legitimacy. What official discourse frames as neutralization thus emerges as a systematic practice of defeminization that pre-configures audience reception long before the film itself is encountered[11,23]. In cross-cultural circulation, this patterned erasure narrows the range of culturally recognizable gender subjectivities, thereby intensifying value conflict while presenting marketability as cultural common sense.

5.2. Sexualization and Objectification: Lexical Technologies of Marketable Femininity

Sexualization in official film title translation operates not as incidental exaggeration but as a structured outcome of institutional constructive agency. Unlike gender erasure, which works through subtraction, this mechanism functions through targeted amplification: it actively injects erotic, aesthetic, and appearance-centered meanings into titles to recalibrate how femininity is expected to function within commercial circulation. This is not merely a stylistic shift but a linguistic technology that converts women from narrative subjects into affective and consumable surfaces[21,24].

A revealing case of sexualization, listed in **Table 1** (Row 2), is *She's the Man*, officially translated as *Football Beauty*. The lexical choice beauty draws on a historically sedimented vocabulary of eroticization that positions female bodies as spectacles to be evaluated and consumed. Audience responses such as *"The point is that she 'becomes a man,' not that she 'looks attractive'"* articulate an intuitive awareness of this mechanism. Here, institutional constructive agency does not misread the original text. Instead, it strategically reorients the interpretive axis of the narrative, shifting the focus from gender performativity and identity disruption to heterosexual market fantasy. The translation thus becomes an instrument for disciplining the limits of acceptable gender play under commercial conditions, as illustrated in non-professional

translation communities on Chinese social media [24].

A similar but historically denser operation occurs in *Gone with the Wind* (**Table 1**, Row 3), rendered as *Beauty in Troubled Times*. The condensation of Scarlett O'Hara into beauty performs narrative flattening. User comments such as *"She lived through war, death, and reconstruction, yet all that remains is 'beauty' "* reflect an emergent critical literacy that recognizes how institutional constructive agency transforms historical catastrophe into a backdrop against which feminine beauty can be safely consumed, as highlighted in studies of online reader responses to retranslations [25].

In *Ocean's Eight* (**Table 1**, Row 7), the subtitle *Beauty Trap* activates a long-standing cultural trope in which female success is narratively bound to seduction. Audience resistance, articulated through comments such as *"They are professionals, not decorative figures,"* demonstrates how this trope is increasingly contested [23,26].

This mechanism intensifies in the case of *Cleopatra* (**Table 1**, Row 8), translated as *The Egyptian Seductive Queen*. The addition of seductive rewrites political authority into sexual mystique. A ruler of geopolitical significance becomes linguistically reconstituted as an eroticized figure, which constitutes a paradigmatic example of institutional constructive agency functioning as a gendered filtering device [13].

Across these cases, sexualization emerges as a consistent institutional strategy: a market-oriented linguistic infrastructure that reorganizes women's narrative positions into aesthetic commodities. By privileging visual pleasure and erotic suggestion over competence or political agency, official translations participate in the ongoing production of gendered objectification, as seen in user-generated translation practices on digital platforms [11,24]. Such lexical technologies can amplify cultural tension between source feminist or gender-critical narratives and target-market norms, revealing how cultural conflict is embedded in seemingly minor paratextual choices.

5.3. Romanticization and Genre Misalignment: Affective Reconfiguration as Gender Governance

Romanticization in translated film titles does not function merely as a tonal adjustment. It operates as a form of affective governance enacted through institutional constructive agency. By introducing sentimental, romantic, or coquettish

cues, institutional actors recalibrate the emotional contract between text and audience before the viewing even begins. This systematically redirects anticipation of female presence from cognitive or political force to affective ornament [8,14].

The classic example of romanticization is *Scent of a Woman* (**Table 1**, Row 5), translated as *Knowing a Woman by Her Scent*. The Chinese title mobilizes an eroticized metaphor, generating expectations of romance. User reactions such as *"I thought it was going to be a romantic story…"* expose a structural misalignment engineered by institutional constructive agency. This is not a technical mistranslation but a deliberate genre reclassification [11,27].

A parallel mechanism appears in *Legally Blonde* (**Table 1**, Row 6), translated as *Pretty Legal Girl*. Pretty reorganizes the protagonist's social legitimacy by foregrounding charm as the interpretive frame. Audience comments such as *"She is not just 'pretty'; she is intelligent"* indicate resistance to this emotional recoding. Here, institutional constructive agency permits visibility only when framed through cuteness or romantic appeal [8].

Romanticization reaches a revealing form in *Charlie's Angel* (**Table 1**, Row 12), translated as *Explosive Darlings*. The term darlings infantilizes and eroticizes, repositioning trained agents as playful, harmless figures. User responses like *"They are not 'darlings'; they are agents"* reveal awareness of this distortion and highlight institutional constructive agency as a mechanism of subtle containment, drawing on broader discussions of discursive regulation [14], through which potentially disruptive forms of female agency are rendered emotionally non-threatening and commercially manageable [14].

Across these cases, romanticization appears as emotional domestication. Women's agency is softened, displaced, and domesticated to remain culturally comfortable and commercially safe, as demonstrated in non-professional translation communities on Chinese social media [21,24]. This affective domestication may facilitate commercial integration of imported stories, yet it does so by displacing gender-critical meanings and generating a quieter form of cultural conflict in reception.

5.4. Audience Counter-Agency: Resistance, Parody, and Paratextual Rewriting on Digital Platforms

While institutional actors exercise constructive agency through omission, sexualization, and romanticization, a qual-

itatively different force emerges from digital audiences: audience counter-agency. This refers to patterned practices through which users contest, rewrite, and redistribute the symbolic authority of official translations. Audiences do not merely receive paratexts; they enact an alternative form of translational authorship[8,14].

In *Young Woman and the Sea* (**Table 1**, Row 1), where the official translation erases gender, the vernacular alternative *Old Lady and the Sea* restores the erased female subject and asserts a confrontational gender consciousness. Audience counter-agency here functions as symbolic repair precisely where institutional constructive agency erased gender[28].

A similar mechanism appears in responses to *Ocean's Eight* (**Table 1**, Row 7). Alternatives such as the *Sisterhood Scheme*, shown in the table, reject seduction-based framings and reconstruct the narrative around competence. Through these practices, audience counter-agency shifts interpretive authority from institutions to networked publics[14,28].

Audience counter-agency also destabilizes the sexualization of masculinity. In *Sexy Beast* (**Table 1**, Row 11), the parody translation *Retired but Still Hot: The Old Gun Returns* critiques gendered commodification itself. Audience counter-agency thus emerges as a reflexive cultural force, not limited to women-centered resistance[8,11].

These cases show that audience counter-agency constitutes a systematic counter-power within the ecology of translated paratexts. Meaning circulates through tensions between top–down constructions and bottom–up rewritings; audiences actively restructure the conditions under which translated meanings become culturally intelligible[28,29]. Read as vernacular integration work, these rewritings translate feminist and anti-objectifying values into locally resonant terms, offering a bottom-up pathway toward mutual intelligibility in intercultural communication.

6. Discussion

The findings further deepen the theoretical understanding of how paratexts, particularly officially translated film titles, shape gendered discourses before audiences encounter the primary narrative. Paratext theory emphasizes that titles act as interpretive gateways, and the results show that these gateways are structured by gendered decisions encoded through institutional constructive agency, which selectively erase female subjectivity, aestheticize or sexualize female figures, and romantically reframe narratives[1,10]. The selective suppression or amplification of gender markers demonstrates that paratexts operate as curated ideological spaces rather than neutral communicative tools. Simultaneously, the emergence of audience counter-agency among ordinary digital audiences echoes recent scholarship describing translation as an increasingly participatory and publicly negotiated activity, in which users negotiate, challenge, and resist institutional gendered constructions[6–8,22,23]. The user-generated alternatives in the dataset illustrate how ordinary digital audiences reclaim interpretive authority by restoring erased female subjectivity, questioning institutional choices, or proposing competing narrative framings[22,23]. These patterns extend agency theory by showing that meaning construction in paratexts emerges from ongoing interaction between institutional constructive agency and ordinary digital audiences, with each shaping gender discourses in distinct ways[1,10].

Several elements of the findings align with earlier research in translation and media studies. Previous research shows that translation, including officially translated film titles, often reproduces dominant ideological narratives, particularly in gender discourses, as explored in digital participatory translation and online reader response studies[24–26]. The systematic erasure of female subjectivity and the aestheticization or sexualization of female figures observed in this study reflect and reproduce these broader trends in gender discourses, confirming that gendered discourses are frequently shaped by prevailing cultural expectations rather than strictly following narrative fidelity. Research on digital participation further supports the view that ordinary digital audiences increasingly intervene in meaning-making processes[13,26]. The user-generated alternatives identified in this study illustrate how ordinary digital audiences reclaim interpretive authority, challenge institutional gendered constructions, and propose competing narrative framings, indicating that participatory translation is increasingly recognized as an established mode of cultural engagement. These consistencies show that the findings reinforce existing knowledge while offering empirical depth to widely acknowledged trends.

At the same time, this study departs from earlier work in several meaningful respects. Prior research typically investigates ideological framing in subtitles, dubbing, or nar-

rative translation, whereas this study shows that officially translated film titles alone carry significant ideological force within gender discourses. By proposing the concept of institutional constructive agency, the study introduces a more precise analytic lens for understanding how institutions modulate gendered discourses at the threshold of reception[30]. In addition, while earlier studies of audience participation portray user involvement as primarily collaborative, the findings here demonstrate that ordinary digital audiences enact a more adversarial and corrective form of counter-agency. Ordinary digital audiences not only participate but also negotiate, challenge, and resist institutional constructive agency, exposing power asymmetries that remain underexamined in translation scholarship. This shift from collaborative participation to active resistance extends the theoretical horizon of gender-focused translation research and paratext studies, highlighting how gender discourses in officially translated film titles are actively negotiated between institutional constructive agency and ordinary digital audiences.

The presence of counterexamples does not undermine these conclusions but illuminates the conditional and context-dependent nature of institutional constructive agency in shaping gendered discourses. Cases such as Birdman, where the erasure of female subjectivity does not affect narrative interpretation, demonstrate that institutional constructive agency becomes analytically salient only when gender is structurally central to the story. Similarly, instances in which romanticization of officially translated film titles aligns with narrative expectations show that emotionally reframed narratives are not inherently ideological but operate within specific cultural, commercial, and institutional parameters. These exceptions highlight that institutional constructive agency is neither uniform nor automatic; it becomes analytically visible when gender intersects with market rationalities, cultural norms, or ideological sensitivities. By clarifying these conditions, these counterexamples reinforce the study's broader claim that gendered discourses in officially translated film titles are patterned, selective, and context-dependent, and that audiences actively negotiate, challenge, and resist these gendered constructions.

These findings show that film title translation can become a flashpoint of intercultural communication, where value differences around gender are publicly articulated and negotiated. In this regard, the cultural conflict observed in this study is not merely the result of linguistic or translational discrepancies but stems from the evolving sensitivity in Chinese society to gender equality issues. With the gradual introduction of Western gender equality concepts, especially feminist discourses, women's roles in both public and private spheres are being redefined. These shifts have led audiences to become more critical and adversarial when encountering gendered expressions in film translations. This cultural conflict reflects the tension between traditional cultural values and modern gender ideologies, especially when gender discourses are reproduced in a highly visible medium like film titles, becoming a focal point for public debate. For cultural industries and localization practice, this suggests that title translation should be treated as a culturally sensitive decision that can either escalate conflict or support integration, calling for gender-aware review and audience-responsive workflows. Such practices can be understood as pragmatic conflict-resolution strategies in intercultural communication. For cultural policy and governance, audience feedback and vernacular retranslation can be understood as a participatory signal of emerging cultural boundaries in the target public sphere. For cultural education and talent development, the study highlights the need for media literacy and translator training that equips actors to recognize gendered framing and to negotiate cultural difference without erasure.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that officially translated film titles operate as ideologically charged paratextual arenas in which gender discourses are continually negotiated. By integrating paratext theory with a dual model of agency, specifically institutional constructive agency and audience counter-agency, the findings reveal that gender discourses encoded in film title translation are neither accidental nor neutral. Instead, they emerge from competing exercises of agency. Institutional actors often reproduce gendered erasure, aestheticization, or romanticized misframing through institutional constructive agency, while ordinary digital audiences actively disrupt these patterns through humor, critique, and alternative reframing. Moreover, these dynamics illuminate how official translations mediate gendered and cultural expectations across linguistic and national boundaries, highlighting the role of film titles in shaping intercultural under-

standing and potential tensions between source and target cultural frameworks. By foregrounding these tensions and the subsequent audience repair, the study reframes film title translation as a micro-site of cultural conflict and integration within international cultural exchange.

The study's primary contribution lies in its reframing of translational power. Whereas prior research often positions audiences as passive recipients, this study shows that ordinary users in digital spaces act as interpretive agents who actively challenge and reshape the ideological work of official translations. This reconceptualization advances translation studies by shifting attention toward vernacular co-authorship and by illustrating how bottom-up counter-agency complicates and redistributes the authority traditionally held by institutional translators. Methodologically, the analysis demonstrates the value of substantial vernacular digital discourse as empirical evidence for studying translation as a socially distributed process. These findings further suggest that digital audiences do not merely interpret translations within a local context but also navigate intercultural meanings, potentially renegotiating cultural norms and expectations embedded in translated texts.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The dataset is limited to three platforms and twelve films, and user comments cannot fully reveal institutional decision-making processes. Future research could expand the corpus, incorporate translator interviews, or examine multimodal paratexts to deepen understanding of how agency circulates across media environments. Despite these constraints, the study offers significant theoretical and empirical insights into how gendered discourses are negotiated in film title translation. Translation functions as a contested field in which gendered discourses are co-authored by institutions and ordinary audiences. This reconceptualization demands a shift in translation practice itself. It calls for institutional mechanisms, for example, gender-sensitivity checks and participatory feedback channels, to integrate critical audience insights into the title localization process. This approach treats conflict not as a public relations risk but as a resource for more resonant and equitable cultural mediation. By foregrounding audience counter-agency, the research highlights how digital publics actively participate in reconfiguring cultural narratives, thereby opening new pathways for examining gender,

agency, and representation within transnational media flows. These pathways have immediate relevance for media industries and cultural policy. They suggest that equitable title translation is not merely a linguistic or marketing challenge, but a matter of discursive governance. This points to the need for industry-wide guidelines that recognize paratexts as key sites of cultural negotiation, and for media literacy efforts that empower both professionals and publics to critically engage with the gendered politics of translation. In doing so, the study also underscores how translated film titles can become sites of intercultural negotiation, where local interpretations may affirm, resist, or transform cultural expectations imported from the source context. Future research could extend this line of inquiry by comparing additional language pairs and national markets to better understand how integration strategies vary across cultural policy environments and media industries.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: X.T. and X.G.; literature review, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing: X.T., X.G. and F.W.; supervision and project administration: X.T.; funding acquisition: X.T. All authors have read and agreed to the submission and publication of the manuscript.

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Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the use of publicly accessible online materials and the absence of any direct interaction or intervention with human participants.

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Conflicts of interest

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