

Translation Strategies for Chinese Films and TV Series Titles: A Boundary Awareness Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the translation strategies for Chinese film and television show titles through the lens of boundary awareness theory. Moving beyond traditional approaches, including literal versus free translation, domestication versus foreignization, functional translation theory, and Skopos theory, this research argues that the fundamental challenge lies in addressing the differences in boundary awareness between Chinese and English. Through detailed case studies of six representative Chinese productions, including *Day and Night*, *The Knockout*, *The Brink*, *A Lonely Hero's Journey*, *Under the Light*, and *The Story of Ming Lan*, this paper demonstrates that effective title translation requires not just linguistic conversion but a deep understanding of the cognitive and cultural differences between Chinese and English speakers. The study proposes specific translation strategies that consider the shift from Chinese process-oriented thinking to English result-oriented expression, from fuzzy to precise boundaries, and from subjective to objective consciousness. While acknowledging the limitations of a small-scale qualitative study, these findings contribute to both theoretical understanding of cross-cultural translation and practical guidance for media localization.

Key words: Chinese film and television, title translation, boundary awareness theory, cross-cultural communication, media localization.

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Introduction

As global cultural exchange intensifies in the digital age, the entertainment industry has emerged as a crucial bridge for cross-cultural communication. For Chinese film and television productions seeking international audiences, translation serves as the critical first step, with title translation being particularly crucial as it forms the audience's first impression and shapes their expectations. Traditional approaches to analyzing title translation have included various theoretical frameworks: literal versus free translation (Wu & Wang, 2017; Zhao & Wu, 2018), the domestication versus foreignization paradigm established by Venuti (2017), functional translation theory (Nord, 2018) which emphasizes the intended purpose of translation, Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1996) which prioritizes the target text's function in its cultural context, and audiovisual translation studies (Díaz Cintas, 2009) which have contributed specific methodologies for media content translation. However, this paper argues that these established approaches, while valuable, may not fully address the complex cognitive and cultural factors that influence effective translation.

Recent cross-cultural translation studies have increasingly emphasized the role of cultural cognitive differences in translation practices (Chen et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023; Yang L. et al., 2023). This shift reflects a growing recognition that successful translation must bridge not just linguistic but also cognitive gaps between cultures. Building on the functional translation theory developed by Nord (2018) and the cultural adaptation approaches outlined by Baker (2018), research has shown that media titles must simultaneously perform marketing, informational, and cultural functions (Valdeón, 2022; Wang & Jalalian Daghigh, 2024). The entertainment industry provides a particularly rich field for examining these dynamics, as titles require simultaneous conveyance of meaning, capture of attention, and cultural sensitivity.

This research specifically aims to analyze the application of boundary awareness theory (Wang & He, 2014) in title translation, identify patterns in translating Chinese media titles for English-speaking audiences, develop a framework for understanding cognitive differences in cross-cultural translation, and explore potential guidelines for media localization professionals. The study's significance lies in addressing the rapid growth of Chinese media in the global market, particularly as streaming platforms like Netflix increasingly feature Chinese content, making effective title translation crucial for market penetration (Thussu et al., 2017).

The investigation focuses on six representative Chinese film and television productions that have achieved international distribution, examining how their title translations may navigate the proposed cognitive differences between Chinese weak boundary awareness and English strong boundary awareness patterns. Through a systematic analysis of linguistic transformation strategies, cultural adaptation techniques, and market positioning considerations, this study aims to contribute to both the theoretical understanding of boundary awareness in translation and the practical application in cross-cultural media communication.

Building on this foundation, this research applies boundary awareness theory – a cognitive linguistic framework that examines how speakers of different languages perceive and express conceptual, temporal, and spatial boundaries differently (Wang & He, 2014) – to analyze how differences in Chinese and English cognitive patterns influence title translation strategies. This approach offers new insights into the challenges and opportunities in cross-cultural media promotion.

1. Theoretical Framework: Boundary Awareness Theory

1.1. Core Theoretical Concepts

The boundary awareness theory, as articulated by Wang and He (2014) and subsequently developed through multiple studies (Wang, 2019; 2020; 2023), represents a framework for understanding Chinese-English translation dynamics. In this study, we define boundary awareness as the cognitive patterns by which speakers of different languages perceive and express boundaries in both language and thought (Wang, 2023). These boundaries encompass temporal distinctions (past/present/future), spatial relationships (here/there, near/far), conceptual categories (self/other, subject/object), and logical structures (cause/effect, process/result). This theory emerged from the observation that Chinese and English speakers exhibit different patterns in how they perceive and express boundaries in both language and thought. These differences manifest not merely as linguistic variations but as cognitive distinctions that influence translation practices.

At its core, the theory posits that Chinese language users demonstrate what can be characterized as weak boundary awareness, while English language users exhibit strong boundary awareness (Wang & He, 2014). Weak boundary awareness is characterized by preferences for collective consciousness over individual distinction, process-oriented over result-oriented expression, and fuzzy over precise categorical boundaries. For example, Chinese speakers often use constructions like “大家都知道” (everyone knows) without specifying the exact scope of “everyone.” Strong boundary awareness, conversely, emphasizes individual distinction, result-oriented expression, and clearly defined categorical boundaries. English speakers typically prefer constructions like “studies show that...” with specific attribution and defined parameters.

This distinction manifests in several ways. Chinese speakers tend to emphasize collective consciousness over individual distinction, favoring expressions that blur the lines between entities and concepts. This preference often results in what Wang (2019) describes as a two-dimensional focus, where relationships between elements are presented in a more fluid, less hierarchical manner. In contrast, English speakers typically demonstrate a preference for individual distinction and clear hierarchical structures, leading to what might be termed a three-dimensional focus in expression.

The theory further identifies a difference in temporal and logical orientation between the two languages. Chinese expression patterns typically exhibit what Wang and He (2014) term retrospective

awareness, characterized by an emphasis on potential over factual statements, process over results, and inductive over deductive reasoning. For instance, Chinese discourse often employs constructions like “可能会...” (might possibly...) that maintain uncertainty, while English discourse prefers definitive statements like “will likely...” that establish clearer probability boundaries. This orientation often manifests in a comparative rather than contrastive analysis and a preference for event-focused narration. English expression, conversely, demonstrates prospective awareness, prioritizing factual statements, results over processes, and deductive reasoning patterns (Nida, 2001). This orientation leads to more contrastive analysis and object-focused narration.

Process-oriented expression emphasizes ongoing actions, states of being, or developmental sequences without clearly defined endpoints. For example, Chinese titles often use constructions like “追凶” (pursuing criminals) that suggest continuous action. Result-oriented expression, conversely, emphasizes outcomes, achievements, or completed states. English titles typically prefer constructions like “The Capture” that indicate definitive resolution.

Recent empirical research has provided validation for some of these theoretical distinctions. Studies by Hu (2004; 2020) have demonstrated how cognitive differences influence translation choices across various genres, while Baños and Díaz Cintas (2024) have extended similar frameworks to digital media contexts, exploring new forms of audiovisual translation in cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing.

Research findings suggest that cognitive patterns influence not only language structure but also audience reception and comprehension patterns (Yang L. et al., 2023). These empirical insights extend beyond academic interest, offering practical guidance for translation practices, particularly in media contexts.

Recent empirical research has provided some support for cognitive differences in translation practices. Studies by Hu (2004; 2020) have demonstrated how cognitive factors may influence translation choices across various genres, while Baños and Díaz Cintas (2024) have extended similar frameworks to digital media contexts, exploring new forms of audiovisual translation in cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing. Hu’s research on eco-translatology suggests that translators’ cognitive approaches affect their selection and adaptation strategies, while Yang H. et al.’s (2023) studies on conceptual metaphor activation in Chinese-English bilinguals indicate that cognitive patterns may influence language processing. These cognitive linguistics insights extend beyond academic interest, offering potential guidance for translation practices, particularly in media contexts.

1.2. Critical Evaluation and Limitations

While boundary awareness theory provides insights into Chinese-English translation patterns, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and engage critically with its applications. First, the theory’s binary opposition between “weak” and “strong” boundary awareness may oversimplify the cognitive

complexity of both Chinese and English speakers. As Pym (2023) argues, cognitive patterns exist on a continuum rather than in discrete categories. Second, the theory primarily focuses on Mandarin Chinese and may not adequately account for regional linguistic variations or the influence of other Chinese dialects (Huang et al., 2024).

Furthermore, boundary awareness theory has been criticized for its limited engagement with postcolonial translation theory and power dynamics in cross-cultural communication (Zeng et al., 2023; Meighan, 2023). The theory's emphasis on adaptation to target language cognitive patterns may inadvertently privilege English-language cognitive frameworks over Chinese ones, raising questions about cultural imperialism in translation practices.

Alternative theoretical frameworks offer different perspectives on translation strategy selection. Venuti's (2017) domestication/foreignization paradigm emphasizes the political implications of translation choices, while Skopos theory developed by Vermeer (1996) prioritizes the intended function of the translation. These frameworks may provide complementary or contrasting insights to boundary awareness theory in specific translation contexts.

Despite these limitations, boundary awareness theory remains relevant for media title translation because titles function as both cultural artifacts and commercial tools, requiring navigation of both cognitive and market considerations. The theory's strength lies in its systematic approach to understanding cognitive differences that affect audience reception, making it valuable for practical translation applications while requiring careful consideration of its theoretical boundaries. Its relevance to market considerations lies in its potential to predict which cognitive patterns might resonate with target audiences, though this connection requires empirical validation.

1.3. Application to Media Translation

The application of boundary awareness theory to media translation, particularly in the context of film and television titles, reveals its relevance to this specialized form of cross-cultural communication. Title translation presents unique challenges because it must simultaneously achieve multiple marketing, informational, and cultural objectives while navigating cognitive differences between source and target-language users. The title must capture attention immediately while conveying the essence of the content in a way that resonates with the target audience's cognitive patterns.

In media translation, the theory's insights about boundary awareness become especially pertinent because titles function as both marketing tools and content indicators, serving what Jakobson (1960) terms multiple communicative functions simultaneously. The Chinese preference for weak boundaries often results in titles that embrace ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning, allowing for rich interpretative possibilities. However, this approach may not serve well in English markets, where audiences typically expect and respond better to titles that establish clear boundaries and specific expectations about the content they will encounter, as contemporary research shows that clear audience expectations are crucial for engagement (Smejkal & Urbániková, 2024).

Furthermore, the theory helps explain why direct translations of Chinese media titles often fail to resonate with English-speaking audiences – a phenomenon documented in media localization studies (Liang & Jamal, 2024). The issue extends beyond simple linguistic or cultural differences to differences in how information is processed and meaning is constructed. Understanding these differences allows translators to make more informed choices that bridge not just linguistic gaps but also cognitive ones.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, analyzing six Chinese productions and their English title translations. This methodology was chosen to allow for in-depth analysis of translation strategies while acknowledging that qualitative case studies provide rich descriptive insights rather than generalizable statistical conclusions (Yin, 2017). The selection criteria included:

- Modern release (2010–2025) – this timeframe was chosen to capture contemporary translation practices in the streaming era, while ensuring international distribution data availability.
- International distribution through major streaming platforms, including Netflix, iQiyi International, Amazon Prime Video, and Viki.
- Measurable international reception (IMDb ratings above 7.0 or Netflix international availability) – IMDb was chosen as a standardized metric for international audience reception.
- Variety of genres and themes.
- Availability of both original Chinese titles and official English translations.

2.1. Case Selection

The selected cases represent diverse genres and translation approaches:

1. 《白夜追凶》 [literal: “White Night Pursuing Criminals”] (*Day and Night*)
 - Genre: Crime thriller
 - Year: 2017
 - Platform: Netflix (international)
 - IMDb Rating: 8.9/10; Netflix international availability: 190+ countries
2. 《狂飙》 [literal: “Wild Whirlwind”] (*The Knockout*)
 - Genre: Crime drama
 - Year: 2023

- Distribution: iQiyi International, Viki, and other streaming platforms
- IMDb Rating: 8.5/10; International distribution through multiple platforms

3. 《悬崖》 [literal: “Cliff”] (*The Brink*)

- Genre: Historical spy drama
- Year: 2012
- International release: Distributed through Amazon Prime Video and specialized streaming services
- IMDb Rating: 8.2/10; Distributed in English-speaking markets

4. 《孤舟》 [literal: “Lonely Boat”] (*A Lonely Hero’s Journey*)

- Genre: War drama
- Year: 2023
- International distribution: Available through multiple international streaming platforms
- IMDb Rating: 7.8/10; Available on international streaming platforms

5. 《坚如磐石》 [literal: “Firm as Rock”] (*Under the Light*)

- Genre: Crime thriller
- Year: 2023
- International release: Festival screenings and VOD platforms
- IMDb Rating: 7.6/10; International festival screenings and streaming

6. 《知否知否应是绿肥红瘦》 [literal: “Do you know, do you know? It should be green fat red thin”] (*The Story of Ming Lan*)

- Genre: Historical Family Drama
- Year: 2018
- International release: Netflix global distribution
- IMDb Rating: 8.7/10; Netflix international distribution

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of title translation. At the foundational level, our analysis examines linguistic transformation strategies, focusing on how structural and semantic elements are reconfigured across languages. This aspect of analysis builds upon Wang and He’s (2014) work on process-oriented versus result-oriented expression patterns (defined in Section 2.1 above), while incorporating recent developments in cognitive linguistics as outlined by Hu (2004; 2020). Additionally, the framework incorporates specific insights from audiovisual translation studies, particularly Díaz Cintas and Bolaños-García-Escribano’s (2020) work on subtitling and revoicing techniques, and commercial translation practices documented by Munday et al. (2022)

regarding translation project management and quality assessment, to address the specific constraints of media title translation, including brevity requirements, marketing functions, and cross-platform distribution needs.

We examine specific linguistic choices, including grammatical structures, lexical selection, and semantic relationships, to understand how meaning is reconstructed in the target language. The second dimension of our framework focuses on cultural adaptation techniques, examining how cultural elements are transformed while maintaining thematic integrity. This approach draws on Wu and Wang's (2017) research on aesthetic differences between Chinese and English expressions, particularly their findings regarding the treatment of metaphorical and symbolic elements in translation.

Market positioning considerations form the third analytical lens, reflecting the commercial realities of international media distribution. Building on Zhao and Wu's (2017) work on international narrative strategies and on recent research on streaming platform localization strategies (Lotz & Soroka, 2022), we examine how translation choices are influenced by market requirements and audience expectations.

The boundary awareness framework, originally proposed by Wang and He (2014) and systematically developed through Wang's series of studies (2019; 2020; 2023), provides the overarching theoretical structure for our analysis. While related concepts such as boundary work in organizational studies exist, Wang's boundary awareness theory specifically addresses cognitive-linguistic differences in translation contexts. This study represents one of the first applications of this framework to media title translation. This cognitive-linguistic perspective allows us to examine how cognitive differences between Chinese and English speakers influence translation choices and their effectiveness. However, we also maintain critical distance from the framework by comparing our findings with alternative theoretical approaches and acknowledging instances where boundary awareness theory may not fully explain observed translation patterns.

The framework particularly attends to what Hu (2004) terms "translation as adaptation and selection" - a process in which translators navigate multiple constraints, including linguistic accuracy, cultural appropriateness, commercial viability, and cognitive accessibility to produce functionally effective translations.

3. Analysis and Findings

3.1. Process-Result Oriented Translation Strategies

The analysis of Chinese media titles and their English translations reveals patterns of cognitive restructuring that extend beyond simple linguistic transformation. These patterns demonstrate the application of boundary awareness theory while suggesting refinements to our understanding of

cross-cultural translation dynamics. Through detailed examination of six representative cases, we can observe how these translations navigate the complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural boundaries.

3.1.1. From Dynamic to Static: 《白夜追凶》 to *Day and Night*

《白夜追凶》 [literal: “White Night Pursuing Criminals”] represents a successful case of Chinese television’s international reach, achieving remarkable domestic success with over 550 million views within three weeks of its release before securing international distribution through Netflix. The series’ Netflix international ratings averaging 4.2/5 stars across English-speaking markets in 2017–2018 and its inclusion in Netflix’s “Top 10” lists in multiple countries suggest effective cross-cultural appeal, though definitive causal links between title translation and viewership success cannot be established without comprehensive audience research.

The original Chinese title demonstrates sophisticated layering of meaning across multiple linguistic and cognitive dimensions, reflecting what Wang (2023) identifies as a characteristic of Chinese weak boundary awareness in narrative construction. The temporal element “白夜” (white night) creates a paradoxical construction typical of Chinese aesthetic preferences, where opposing concepts coexist without clear demarcation. This paradox serves multiple narrative functions. First, it establishes the temporal setting of the story, where distinctions between day and night become crucial to the plot. More significantly, it creates what Wu and Wang (2017, p. 104) term “cognitive ambiguity,” where the blurring of temporal boundaries mirrors the blurring of identity boundaries central to the narrative.

The active element “追凶” (pursuing criminals) adds dynamic movement to this temporal framework, exemplifying what Wang and He (2014, p. 10) identify as the Chinese preference for process-oriented expression. The verb “追” (pursue) creates ongoing action without clear temporal or spatial boundaries, while the object “凶” (criminal) maintains intentional semantic ambiguity because the character can refer to both the criminal act and the criminal person, allowing for multiple interpretative layers that enhance narrative complexity. This construction perfectly serves the narrative’s core concept, where twin brothers – one a police officer, the other a suspect – exchange identities to solve crimes, creating deliberate confusion between pursuer and pursued.

The English translation *Day and Night* demonstrates what appears to be application of boundary awareness theory, though we cannot determine whether this was a conscious theoretical application or an intuitive translation decision through several key transformations. Rather than attempting to preserve the process-oriented pursuit narrative, the translation establishes clear temporal boundaries through binary opposition. This transformation aligns with what Nida (2001) identifies as English speakers’ preference for clearly defined states over ongoing processes. The conjunction “and” serves as what Lakoff and Johnson (2003) term a “strong boundary marker,” creating clear separation between temporal states while maintaining their relationship.

More subtly, the translation shifts the cognitive focus from active pursuit to a temporal state, reflecting what Wang (2023) identifies as an English preference for state-based over action-based description, though this generalization about English cognitive patterns requires cautious interpretation given the limited empirical evidence. This shift maintains the thematic tension of the original, particularly the interplay between light and dark, good and evil – while adapting to patterns commonly observed in English cognitive processing that favour clear categorical distinctions (though the causal relationship between cognitive patterns and translation success remains to be empirically established). The international reception of this series may result from multiple factors, including production quality, narrative complexity, and marketing strategy, with title translation being just one variable among many.

The translation also demonstrates the sophisticated handling of genre conventions in international markets. As Zhao and Wu (2017) note, crime drama titles in English often employ binary opposition to suggest moral conflict. *Day and Night* fits this pattern while maintaining the philosophical depth of the original, suggesting that successful translation must navigate not just linguistic and cognitive boundaries but also genre expectations.

3.1.2. Genre Conventions in English Crime Drama Titles

To understand why translations like *Day and Night* prove effective for English-speaking audiences, it is essential to examine how English-language crime drama titles typically function. Analysis of successful English crime series reveals several consistent patterns that inform effective translation strategies.

English crime drama titles often employ binary oppositions to suggest moral conflict, as seen in series such as *Good vs Evil*, *Law & Order*, and *Black and White*. Temporal markers frequently appear in successful crime titles (*24*, *Prime Time*, *Night Shift*), establishing clear temporal boundaries that help audiences understand the narrative framework. Additionally, English crime titles tend to favor concrete imagery over metaphorical abstraction, with series such as *The Wire*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad* using specific objects or actions rather than poetic imagery.

The preference for result-oriented rather than process-oriented titles appears consistently across successful English crime dramas. Titles like *The Killing*, *The Investigation*, and *The Capture* emphasize completed actions or defined states rather than ongoing processes. This pattern supports the boundary awareness theory's observation of English's preference for result-oriented expression, though it also reflects genre-specific marketing considerations in English-language television markets.

Furthermore, English crime drama titles frequently establish a clear protagonist focus through definite articles and specific character references (*The Detective*, *The Investigator*, *The Prosecutor*), reflecting what Wang (2023) identifies as English strong boundary awareness in character definition.

This preference helps explain why translations that establish clear character or narrative focus tend to resonate more effectively with English-speaking audiences.

3.1.3. From Natural Force to Result: 《狂飙》 to *The Knockout*

The translation of 《狂飙》 [literal: “Wild Whirlwind”] to *The Knockout* presents a dramatic example of cognitive restructuring in title translation. The original Chinese title employs what Wang (2019) identifies as a characteristic Chinese force metaphor, combining “狂” (wild, intense) with “飙” (whirlwind, rapid movement) to create an image of unstoppable momentum. This metaphorical construction reflects documented patterns in Chinese cognitive preferences for natural force imagery in expressing human dynamics, though individual variation in metaphor preference exists within both language communities (Yang et al., 2023; Wang & Sun, 2023).

The drama focuses on the conflict between law enforcement and organized crime, specifically following a police officer’s 20-year struggle against criminal organizations. The Chinese title’s use of natural force metaphor creates what Zhao and Wu (2017) term “expanded consciousness,” allowing multiple interpretations of the force relationships depicted in the narrative. The whirlwind metaphor suggests not just physical conflict but also moral and social turbulence, reflecting the Chinese preference for multilayered metaphorical expression.

The English translation *The Knockout* demonstrates a shift from process-oriented natural force imagery to result-oriented combat terminology. “Knockout” suggests a definitive conclusion to conflict, aligning with documented English preferences for clear resolution markers (Newmark, 1981). However, this translation also raises questions about the applicability of boundary awareness theory across different semantic domains. The boxing metaphor in “knockout” may resonate differently across various English-speaking cultures, suggesting that cognitive patterns interact with culture-specific associations in complex ways that require further empirical investigation.

3.2. Metaphorical Transformation Strategies

3.2.1. Spatial Metaphor to Moral Position: 《坚如磐石》 to *Under the Light*

《坚如磐石》 [literal: “Firm as Rock”] presents a case of how contemporary Chinese crime drama engages with traditional moral metaphor while addressing modern social issues. The narrative follows Su Jianming, a young police officer in the municipal criminal investigation center, who partners with Li Huirong to investigate a case involving powerful interest groups. Their investigation reveals complex networks of corruption and criminality, testing both their professional abilities and moral resolve.

The Chinese title employs the four-character idiom structure (坚如磐石) in a way that demonstrates what Wang (2023) terms “traditional moral-metaphorical construction.” The comparison to stone (磐石) creates what Wu and Rao (2016) identify as a characteristic Chinese quality-based metaphor, where physical attributes suggest moral qualities. The character combination “坚如” (firm as) establishes an explicit comparison, while “磐石” (bedrock) provides the concrete image that grounds the moral metaphor.

The English translation *Under the Light* demonstrates reconfiguration of these moral-metaphorical relationships through several key transformations. The shift from physical metaphor (stone) to moral symbolism (light) reflects what some scholars identify as English preference for explicit moral frameworks, though this claim requires careful qualification, as English also employs physical metaphors for moral concepts (“solid character,” “rock-solid values”). The specific choice of light symbolism may reflect genre conventions in English crime drama rather than fundamental cognitive differences (Wang & He, 2014). The spatial preposition “under” creates a clear positional relationship, establishing what Zhao and Wu (2017) term “moral-spatial hierarchy” common in English crime drama titles.

This translation strategy illustrates both the strengths and limitations of boundary awareness theory. While the theory successfully predicts the shift from implicit Chinese metaphor to explicit English moral positioning, it does not fully account for the creative adaptation that produces “Under the Light” rather than a more literal rendering like “Solid as Rock.” This suggests that successful translation requires not just an understanding of cognitive patterns but also creative cultural adaptation that transcends theoretical frameworks.

3.2.2. Physical Danger to Abstract Threat: 《悬崖》 to *The Brink*

《悬崖》 [literal: “Cliff”] represents a significant achievement in historical spy drama, with its narrative unfolding against the complex backdrop of Northeast China during wartime. The series follows the intricate story of Communist Party special agent Zhou Yi and female radio operator Gu Qiuyan, who, posing as a married couple, engage in dangerous undercover operations while confronting their formidable adversary, the police department’s special affairs division chief, Gao Bin. The dramatic tension emerges from their precarious position as they navigate both physical dangers and moral complexities of their mission.

The Chinese title demonstrates what Wang (2023) identifies as a characteristic Chinese spatial metaphor, where physical positioning suggests multiple layers of peril. The character combination “悬崖” creates meaning through both literal and figurative implications. As Wu and Wang (2017) note, the literal meaning of a cliff edge (悬崖) serves as a physical metaphor for the precarious

position of undercover operatives. This spatial metaphor extends to moral and political dimensions, reflecting what Lakoff and Johnson (2003) term “conceptual metaphor” in Chinese title composition.

Particularly significant is the use of the character “悬” (suspended), which creates what Wang and He (2014) identify as characteristic Chinese process orientation because it suggests ongoing tension and instability rather than a fixed state or resolved condition. The state of being suspended suggests ongoing tension rather than resolution, perfect for a narrative about undercover operations where agents constantly balance between opposing forces. The second character “崖” (cliff) further reinforces this tension through its suggestion of imminent danger, creating what Zhao and Wu (2017) term “sustained metaphorical threat.”

The adaptation *The Brink* reveals the sophisticated handling of multiple translation challenges. First, the addition of the definite article “the” creates what Hatim and Mason (1997) identify as a characteristic English boundary marker, establishing a clear categorical definition absent in the Chinese original. The choice of “brink” maintains the spatial metaphor while making the state of peril more explicit, reflecting documented English cognitive patterns that prefer clear categorical definition in metaphorical expression, though the extent to which this reflects a universal cognitive difference rather than learned cultural convention remains debatable.

However, the translation also demonstrates how boundary awareness theory intersects with genre expectations in complex ways. English spy thriller titles often employ spatial metaphors of danger (*On the Edge*, *The Precipice*, *Point of No Return*). Still, these typically require more explicit threat markers than their Chinese counterparts. *The Brink* achieves this balance, though alternative translations might have been equally effective, suggesting that multiple translation strategies can successfully navigate the same cognitive boundaries.

3.3. Cultural-Literary Translation: From 《孤舟》 to *A Lonely Hero's Journey*

《孤舟》 [literal: “Lonely Boat”] represents a sophisticated example of how historical war drama can engage with both classical literary tradition and contemporary narrative requirements. The series follows American-educated architect Gu Yizhong, whose professional and personal life becomes entangled in the dangerous political landscape of wartime China. His complex relationship with Wang puppet regime’s special agent Zhou Zhifei forms the core of a narrative that explores themes of loyalty, identity, and survival in times of national crisis.

The Chinese title draws deeply from classical literary tradition, specifically referencing Yang Wanli’s Song Dynasty poem “泊平江百花洲”. The poem’s final lines “莫怨孤舟无定处 · 此身自是一孤舟” (Don’t blame the lonely boat for having no fixed place, as this self is itself a lonely boat) create what Wang (2023) terms “cultural memory resonance,” where contemporary narrative gains depth through historical literary reference. This phenomenon of negotiating literary aesthetics in translation has been documented by Wu and Zhou (2013) in their study of classical Chinese literature

translation, where they highlight the challenges of maintaining aesthetic qualities across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The metaphor of the solitary boat (孤舟) operates on multiple levels in Chinese cultural consciousness. As Wu and Wang (2017) observe, it simultaneously suggests physical isolation, moral independence, and philosophical understanding of life's impermanence. This multilayered meaning construction demonstrates what Hu (2004) identifies as a characteristic of Chinese weak boundary awareness, in which different levels of meaning coexist without clear demarcation.

The English translation *A Lonely Hero's Journey*, represents a sophisticated reconfiguration of these meaning relationships for international audiences, though it also demonstrates the inevitable loss that accompanies cross-cultural adaptation. The transformation operates through several key moves: first, the addition of "hero" establishes a clear protagonist focus, reflecting what Nida (2001) identifies as English preference for character-centered narrative framing. The use of "journey" maintains the movement metaphor while making the narrative progression explicit, adapting to what Wang and He (2014) term "result-oriented cognitive patterns" in English-language audiences.

However, this translation also illustrates the limitations of any theoretical framework in accounting for the creative decisions required in cross-cultural adaptation. The choice to transform the classical boat metaphor into "hero's journey" reflects not just cognitive differences but also genre expectations in English war drama, where individual heroic narratives predominate (Campbell, 2008). This suggests that successful translation requires navigating multiple overlapping frameworks rather than adhering to a single theoretical approach.

3.4. Poetic Allusion to Narrative Focus: From 《知否》 to *The Story of Ming Lan*

The translation of television drama 《知否知否应是绿肥红瘦》 [literal: "Do you know, do you know? It should be green fat red thin"] (*The Story of Ming Lan*) presents an exemplary case of how contemporary Chinese media engages with classical literary tradition while navigating international market requirements. The drama, based on the novel of the same name, follows the story of Ming Lan, the sixth daughter of the Sheng family during the Song Dynasty, who overcomes numerous obstacles through her intelligence and perseverance after her mother's death.

The Chinese title draws directly from Li Qingzhao's renowned Song Dynasty poem "如梦令·昨夜雨疏风骤" (As in a Dream: Last Night the Rainy Gusts), specifically quoting its famous final line "知否，知否？应是绿肥红瘦" (Do you know? Do you know? The green should be lush while the red grows thin). This direct literary reference exemplifies what Wang (2023) terms "poetic allusion consciousness," where meaning emerges not through direct statement but through cultural-literary associations.

The English translation *The Story of Ming Lan* reveals a sophisticated reconfiguration of these relationships for international audiences, embodying the shift from poetic allusion to narrative focus that characterizes effective cross-cultural media translation. Rather than attempting to preserve the literary allusion—which would require extensive cultural knowledge among the target audience—the translation establishes a clear narrative focus through a direct, titular reference to the protagonist.

This transformation exemplifies several key patterns identified in our theoretical framework, while also revealing the theory's limitations. While boundary awareness theory successfully predicts the shift from allusive to direct expression, it cannot fully account for the specific creative choices involved in producing *The Story of Ming Lan* rather than alternatives like *Ming Lan's Tale* or *The Ming Lan Chronicles*. These alternative translations demonstrate potential variety in approaches. *Ming Lan's Tale* emphasizes personal narrative through possessive constructions, *The Ming Lan Chronicles* suggests historical documentation through genre identification, while *The Story of Ming Lan* balances personal focus with universal narrative appeal. This suggests that effective translation requires not just theoretical understanding but also intuitive cultural adaptation that transcends systematic approaches.

Wang's (2020) observation that successful media localization requires "cognitive reconfiguration rather than linguistic equivalence" helps explain this transformation. The solution employed here—focusing on narrative clarity rather than poetic resonance—represents what appears to be an application of boundary awareness theory that prioritizes cognitive accessibility over semantic fidelity, ultimately serving the marketing function of the title while respecting target audience cognitive patterns. However, the extent to which this was conscious theoretical application versus intuitive cultural adaptation remains unclear.

4. Discussion

4.1. Key Translation Strategies

The analysis of these six Chinese media titles reveals several patterns in cross-cultural title translation, though it is important to emphasize that these patterns emerge from a limited sample and should be considered exploratory rather than definitive.

4.1.1. From Diffuse Focus to Hierarchical Expression

The first significant pattern involves the transformation from diffuse focus to hierarchical expression. In Chinese titles, elements often exist in a horizontal relationship, as exemplified by “*白夜追凶*” where the temporal setting (white night) and the action (pursuing criminals) are presented without explicit hierarchical arrangement. The English translation *Day and Night* establishes a clear structural

hierarchy through the use of parallel construction and the conjunction “and,” creating a more defined relationship between the elements. This transformation aligns with Wang’s (2023) observation of stronger boundary awareness in English expression. However, alternative explanations, including genre conventions and marketing considerations, may also account for these patterns.

4.1.2. From Ambiguous to Precise Expression

The second pattern emerges in the shift from ambiguous to precise expression. Chinese titles often employ poetic or metaphorical expressions that create intentional ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations. This is particularly evident in “孤舟” (literally “lonely boat”), where the metaphorical implications draw on classical Chinese literary traditions. The English translation *A Lonely Hero’s Journey* converts this poetic ambiguity into a more concrete expression that explicitly identifies the protagonist’s role and the nature of the narrative. This transformation reflects what Wu and Wang (2017) describe as the difference between Chinese aesthetic appreciation of suggestive ambiguity and English preference for precise denotation, though it also demonstrates how commercial translation requirements may influence strategic choices beyond purely cognitive considerations.

4.1.3. From Process Orientation to Result Orientation

A third significant pattern lies in the shift from process orientation to result orientation. Chinese titles frequently emphasize ongoing actions or developments, as seen in 《狂飙》 (literally “wild whirlwind”), which suggests continuous, dynamic action. The English translation *The Knockout* focuses instead on a decisive outcome or result. This transformation exemplifies Wang and He’s (2014) observation about the fundamental difference between Chinese process-oriented and English result-oriented thinking patterns, though the small sample size and lack of contrastive analysis with unsuccessful translations limits the generalizability of this finding.

4.1.4. From Poetic Allusion to Narrative Focus

A fourth significant pattern emerges in the transformation from poetic allusion to narrative focus. Chinese media titles frequently incorporate classical literary references that create rich cultural resonance through allusion, as exemplified by “知否知否应是绿肥红瘦” which directly quotes Li Qingzhao’s renowned Song Dynasty poem. Such titles operate through cultural association rather than direct description, creating meaning through what Wang (2023) terms “implicit cultural coding.” The English translation *The Story of Ming Lan* reconfigures this approach by establishing clear narrative framing through direct references to the protagonist and explicit genre identification.

This pattern represents a sophisticated response to differences in boundary awareness, requiring not just linguistic restructuring but a complete semiotic reconfiguration. However, it is important to note

that this strategy may not be universally applicable, as it depends heavily on the degree of cultural distance between source and target audiences and the specific commercial requirements of media distribution.

4.2. Practical Implications for Media Localization

These findings suggest several considerations for media localization practices, though practitioners should note that these recommendations emerge from a limited qualitative study and require further empirical validation. Contemporary media localization practices employed by major studios and streaming platforms have often focused primarily on linguistic equivalence or cultural adaptation strategies that balance source culture preservation with target culture accessibility (Chalaby, 2024). However, our analysis suggests that these particular cases of successful title translation required a more fundamental understanding of cognitive differences between Chinese and English speakers. Media localization teams must consider not just what a title means, but how it is processed and understood by audiences with different boundary awareness patterns.

The case of 《坚如磐石》 (*Under the Light*) particularly demonstrates this need, though it also illustrates the creative adaptation required beyond theoretical application. The Chinese title uses a four-character idiom expressing firmness and stability through a metaphorical comparison to stone. Rather than attempting to find an English idiom with a similar meaning, the translators created a new metaphorical framework that maintains the thematic essence while adapting to English cognitive patterns. This approach succeeded in this instance by recognizing that effective translation must bridge not just linguistic but cognitive gaps, though alternative strategies might have proven equally effective.

Based on this analysis, media localization teams might consider implementing cognitive accessibility assessments alongside traditional linguistic and cultural evaluations, though such approaches would require empirical validation through audience testing before systematic implementation.

4.3. Theoretical Contributions and Limitations

This research makes several contributions to translation theory while acknowledging significant limitations in scope and methodology. The study extends the application of boundary awareness theory from literary translation (Wang, 2020) to media title translation, where immediate impact and market success are crucial considerations. However, the study's small sample size and focus on titles that achieved international distribution may introduce selection bias, as unsuccessful translation strategies are not systematically examined.

The study also advances the understanding of how cognitive patterns may influence translation choices, though it cannot establish definitive causal relationships between theoretical frameworks

and translation success. The consistent patterns observed across different genres and time periods suggest that successful translators, whether consciously or unconsciously, may adapt their strategies to address fundamental differences in boundary awareness.

Moreover, our analysis reveals the interconnected nature of linguistic, cognitive, and market considerations in title translation, while also demonstrating the limitations of any single theoretical framework in accounting for the complexity of commercial translation practices. The success of translations like *The Knockout* and *Day and Night* may reflect adherence to target language cognitive patterns, but it may equally reflect effective genre positioning, marketing strategy, or production quality factors not captured in title analysis.

While the study's focus on boundary awareness theory provides valuable insights, it may also obscure other relevant theoretical frameworks. Alternative approaches such as polysystem theory (Even-Zohar, 2021; Toury, 2012), cultural translation theory (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990; Tymoczko, 2014), or commercial localization frameworks might provide different or complementary insights into the translation strategies observed.

5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that effective translation of Chinese film and television titles may require understanding and addressing differences in boundary awareness between Chinese and English, though definitive conclusions require further empirical study with larger sample sizes and systematic audience research. The findings from this exploratory analysis of six cases suggest that certain successful translation strategies in the cases examined must consider not only linguistic equivalence but also cognitive and cultural patterns of expression.

This study has made several contributions while acknowledging important limitations. First, the research extends boundary awareness theory to the field of media translation, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding cross-cultural communication boundaries in this specific context. Second, it offers preliminary insights that may inform practical guidelines for title translation, though these require further validation before systematic implementation. Furthermore, through analysis of six representative cases, the study identifies potential effective patterns in cross-cultural media marketing.

Regarding research limitations and future directions, several important areas for development must be addressed to validate and extend these findings. Future research could expand the sample size of translations to obtain more representative data and include a systematic analysis of unsuccessful translations to understand the limits of observed patterns. Additionally, comprehensive audience reception studies could be incorporated to gain deeper insights into how target-market audiences respond to and understand translated content, rather than inferring effectiveness from commercial success metrics. Moreover, research could analyze the correlation between translation strategies and market performance to explore more effective cross-cultural marketing approaches while

controlling for production quality, marketing budget, and distribution factors. Finally, expanding the range of language pairs studied and including comparative analysis with other theoretical frameworks would help validate the universality and specificity of the research findings.

This exploratory study provides a foundation for understanding how boundary awareness theory might apply to media title translation. Still, its findings should be considered preliminary pending further empirical validation. The patterns identified suggest promising directions for both theoretical development and practical application. However, they require careful verification through more comprehensive research methodologies.

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