

Bidirectional Film Title Translation through Prospective Compression and Retrospective Expansion

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Abstract: This study examines bidirectional film title translation through the perspectives of prospective compression and retrospective expansion, drawing on [Wang Jianguo's \(2025\)](#) contrastive account of Chinese and English, particularly the differences between process orientation and result orientation and between weak and strong semantic boundaries. Based on a qualitative comparative analysis of 16 Chinese and English film titles, the study identifies four major application paths for each direction of translation. In Chinese-to-English translation, prospective compression is manifested through process-to-result, concrete-to-abstract, event-to-object, and positive-comparison-to-comparative transformations. These operations condense processual meaning, strengthen semantic boundaries, and produce concise and target-oriented English titles. In English-to-Chinese translation, retrospective expansion operates through result-to-process, abstract-to-concrete, object-to-event, and comparative-to-positive transformations. These operations recover implicit processes, concrete imagery, and narrative information, thereby increasing the accessibility and expressive appeal of Chinese titles. The analysis shows that the two strategies are particularly compatible with the functional demands of film titles, including brevity, thematic communication, genre identification, and cross-cultural accessibility. At the same time, the study argues that neither strategy should be applied mechanically: compression should not result in excessive semantic loss, while expansion should not introduce meanings unsupported by the source title. The findings provide a practical framework for bidirectional film title translation and offer a case-based application of contrastive Chinese-English analysis to audiovisual translation.

Keywords: *Prospective compression; retrospective expansion; film title translation; Chinese-English contrast; bidirectional translation.*

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Introduction

In the cross-cultural circulation of audiovisual works, film titles are often the first linguistic point of contact between a film and its audience. Their function extends beyond textual identification to the transmission of cultural meanings, the formation of aesthetic expectations, and the generation of market appeal. A successful translation of a film title therefore needs to balance semantic communication, cultural adaptation, aesthetic effect, and audience attraction within a highly condensed linguistic form. For this reason, film title translation has long been an important topic with both practical and theoretical significance in translation studies.

As exchanges between Chinese and foreign films have intensified, Chinese translations of English film titles and English translations of Chinese film titles have exhibited different linguistic characteristics and translation problems. Chinese and English differ substantially in their preferred modes of organization and expression. Chinese film titles often foreground processes, accumulated imagery, and relatively open semantic boundaries, using dynamic narration or concrete scenes to construct an atmosphere. English film titles, by contrast, tend to foreground results, condensed concepts, and clearer semantic boundaries, often using nominalized or abstract expressions to summarize a film's subject. These differences mean that literal translation may produce

redundant or unnatural English, or obscure and under-motivated Chinese, making systematic strategies based on contrastive linguistics necessary.

[Wang Jianguo's \(2025\)](#) concepts of prospective compression and retrospective expansion provide a useful theoretical framework for addressing this problem. Grounded in the differences between Chinese and English, prospective compression is primarily associated with Chinese-to-English translation and involves condensing processual meaning while directing the target expression toward a more delimited result or concept. Retrospective expansion, by contrast, is primarily associated with English-to-Chinese translation and involves recovering processes, images, or contextual meanings that are compressed or implicit in English. These strategies offer a direction-sensitive approach to restructuring film titles for target-language readers and viewers.

This study therefore asks two questions: (1) How can prospective compression be operationalized in Chinese-to-English film title translation? and (2) How can retrospective expansion be operationalized in English-to-Chinese film title translation? Through a qualitative analysis of 16 film titles, the study identifies four major transformation paths in each direction and discusses their practical value and limitations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Core Differences between Chinese and English

[Liu Miqing's](#) three-level approach to Chinese-English contrast examines differences in language structure, modes of expression, and patterns of thought. Building on this tradition, [Wang \(2025, pp. 5–8\)](#) argues that differences in language type and cognition directly constrain how meanings are organized and presented in translation.

At the structural level, Chinese is predominantly an analytic language in which grammatical relations are frequently conveyed through word order and context, with relatively few overt morphological markers and considerable structural flexibility. English combines analytic and synthetic features and relies more heavily on morphological distinctions, such as tense and number, as well as overt grammatical devices, including prepositions and conjunctions, to establish syntactic relations ([Wang, 2025, pp. 12–15](#)). At the level of expression, Chinese tends to favor dynamic description and concrete imagery, with semantic coherence often relying on parataxis; English tends to favor static statements and abstract categorization, and with coordination and logical relations more explicitly marked ([Wang, 2025, pp. 18–22](#)). At the level of thought, Chinese discourse is characterized by holistic and subject-oriented tendencies, allowing relatively flexible semantic boundaries, whereas English discourse tends to be more analytical and object-oriented, emphasizing categorization and explicit delimitation ([Wang, 2025, pp. 24–27](#)).

These differences are particularly relevant to film titles. Chinese titles often use dynamic verbs and compact images to construct a sequence of associations, allowing meaning to unfold through context and audience inference. English titles more often focus on a state, result, category, or abstract concept, thereby making the semantic target more explicit. Chinese titles can consequently leave more meaning to be completed by cultural knowledge, while English titles often employ more clearly delimited structures to reduce ambiguity. Film title translation is therefore not simply a matter of formal equivalence; it involves reconstructing meaning in accordance with the linguistic and cognitive preferences of the target language.

Prospective Compression

Prospective compression is a direction-sensitive concept used by [Wang \(2025\)](#) to explain a tendency in Chinese-to-English translation. In this process, the target text does not necessarily reproduce the source text's original sequence of semantic development. Instead, it moves toward the endpoint or conceptual result of the source meaning, producing what Wang describes as an n+1 relation in semantic presentation. The operation is not simple deletion. It involves compressing processual meaning and strengthening semantic boundaries so that the target expression conforms more closely to English preferences for result orientation and explicit delimitation ([Wang, 2025, pp. 33–34](#)).

The relevance of prospective compression is particularly evident in film titles, where extremely limited linguistic space must carry thematic information and communicative appeal. Processual descriptions, concrete imagery, and narrative structures common in Chinese titles may therefore need systematic restructuring in English. Four paths discussed in the present study are process-to-result, concrete-to-abstract, event-to-object, and positive-comparison-to-comparative transformation. These operations

convert process-oriented and descriptive expressions into more condensed, delimited, and target-oriented English titles.

Retrospective Expansion

Retrospective expansion describes the opposite direction of semantic adjustment in English-to-Chinese translation. [Wang \(2025, p. 97\)](#) argues that because Chinese has a stronger retrospective and process-oriented tendency, English-to-Chinese translation may expand meanings that are highly compressed or implicit in English. In this sense, retrospective expansion does not merely add words; it reconstructs the semantic and imagistic information necessary for a Chinese audience to process the title naturally.

English film titles frequently center on abstract nouns, results, or highly condensed concepts. Direct translation can therefore be opaque in Chinese. Retrospective expansion can recover actions, settings, or narrative situations implied by the English title. The four paths examined here are result-to-process, abstract-to-concrete, object-to-event, and comparative-to-positive transformation. By weakening rigid semantic boundaries and increasing imagery and narrativity, these operations can improve the accessibility and cultural resonance of Chinese film titles.

Prospective Compression in Chinese-to-English Film Title Translation

This section examines how prospective compression operates in Chinese-to-English film title translation. Because Chinese titles often rely on processual narration, concrete imagery, and implicit expression, whereas English titles tend to favor semantic self-sufficiency, result orientation, and clear genre identification, translation may require active compression and restructuring. Four practical paths are discussed below.

Process-to-Result Transformation

[Wang \(2025, pp. 100–102\)](#) treats process-to-result transformation as a major path of prospective compression. In Chinese-to-English translation, processual actions are condensed and the core result or state is foregrounded, shifting the title from dynamic narration to a more static semantic focus. This operation is particularly relevant to Chinese film titles containing dynamic verbs and descriptive sequences.

Example 1: 《飞驰人生》

Literal translation: Speeding Life

Target title: Pegasus

The Chinese title foregrounds the dynamic process of “飞驰” (“speeding” or “racing”). A literal rendering such as “Speeding Life” retains this processual structure and produces a loose semantic boundary in English. “Pegasus,” by contrast, condenses the title into a single symbolic noun. In the framework adopted here, the translation shifts attention from the process of racing toward an emblematic result-oriented image associated with speed, aspiration, and legendary achievement. The one-word title is concise and semantically self-contained, illustrating the direction of prospective compression.

Example 2: 《哪吒之魔童降世》

Literal translation: The Devil Boy Is Born

Target title: Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child

The source title uses “降世” (“descend into the world” or “be born”) to evoke the arrival of the protagonist. The literal version is sentence-like and retains a processual structure. The target title nominalizes the process as “Birth,” while the colon separates the character name from the thematic designation. The result is a more compact nominal structure with clearer semantic boundaries, illustrating the process-to-result tendency.

Concrete-to-Abstract Transformation

Chinese film titles often rely on concrete scenes, actions, or culturally specific images to suggest a broader theme. In cross-cultural communication, however, such images may create cognitive barriers. Prospective compression can abstract the source image into a more widely accessible conceptual expression.

Example 3: 《活着》

Literal translation: Living

Target title: To Live

The source title uses “活着” to refer to the continuation of life. “Living” preserves the core meaning but foregrounds an ongoing process through its gerund form. “To Live” instead presents the idea as an existential proposition. The translation therefore shifts from a concrete experiential state toward a more abstract statement about existence, reducing the processual emphasis while retaining the philosophical core of the title.

Example 4: 《阳光灿烂的日子》

Literal translation: Sunny Days

Target title: In the Heat of the Sun

The Chinese title constructs a concrete image of brilliant sunshine and relies on that image to evoke youth, memory, and a particular historical atmosphere. “Sunny Days” reproduces the image but does not fully signal the film’s emotional and thematic resonance. “In the Heat of the Sun” moves from the concrete visual description toward a more conceptually loaded expression. “Heat” can evoke youthful restlessness, historical intensity, and emotional tension, allowing the title to carry a more focused thematic atmosphere in English.

Event-to-Object Transformation

Chinese titles may foreground an event or situation, whereas English titles often favor a stable object, role, or thematic category. Transforming an event into an object or character designation can therefore strengthen semantic boundaries and improve genre recognition.

Example 5: 《战狼》

Literal translation: Fighting Wolf

Target title: Wolf Warrior

The Chinese title can be read as an image of a wolf associated with combat. “Fighting Wolf” foregrounds an action and sounds less natural as an English film title. “Wolf Warrior” converts the action-oriented description into a stable character designation. “Warrior” also provides a clearer genre cue, while “Wolf” retains the source image and its connotations of toughness and ferocity.

Example 6: 《路边野餐》

Literal translation: Roadside Picnic

Target title: Kaili Blues

The source title presents a concrete scene. Although “Roadside Picnic” is semantically close to the Chinese title, it can suggest a light or leisurely activity in English and may not immediately evoke the film’s melancholic tone. “Kaili Blues” retains the geographical reference “Kaili” and converts the concrete scene into a thematic and emotional designation through “Blues.” The translation therefore moves from an event-like image toward a more delimited title centered on place and mood.

Positive-Comparison-to-Comparative Transformation

Chinese titles can express an evaluative tendency relatively implicitly, whereas English frequently makes contrasts explicit through comparative forms. Transforming a neutral or positive evaluation into a comparative expression can foreground the relationship between two states and increase semantic tension.

Example 7: 《更好的明天》

Literal translation: A Good Tomorrow

Target title: A Better Tomorrow

The phrase “更好” implies an improvement but does not grammatically establish the comparison in isolation. “A Good Tomorrow” weakens this contrast. “A Better Tomorrow” explicitly establishes a comparison between the present and the future, making the title’s hopeful orientation more visible and strengthening its rhetorical force.

Example 8: 《无名之辈》

Literal translation: Unknown People

Target title: A Cool Fish

“Unknown People” reproduces the source title’s reference to ordinary, socially inconspicuous people but lacks stylistic force in English. “A Cool Fish” departs substantially from literal form and uses an evaluative expression to create a stronger contrast between ordinary social status and distinctive personal qualities. The example illustrates how a target title can intensify an implicit evaluative dimension rather than reproduce the source wording literally.

Retrospective Expansion in English-to-Chinese Film Title Translation

This section examines retrospective expansion as the directionally opposite operation. English titles frequently use highly condensed nouns, abstract concepts, or result-oriented expressions. To accommodate Chinese preferences for process, imagery, and narrative suggestion, a translator may recover information that is implicit in the English title. The following four paths illustrate this process.

Result-to-Process Transformation

English titles may foreground an abstract result or identity, whereas Chinese audiences often respond more readily to a title that evokes an action, setting, or narrative process. Result-to-process transformation can therefore increase imagery and narrativity.

Example 9: The Revenant

Literal translation: 《亡魂》

Target title: 《荒野猎人》

“The Revenant” is a highly condensed identity noun referring to a person who returns from the dead or comes back. A literal rendering such as “亡魂” emphasizes the abstract identity but provides little narrative or visual information. 《荒野猎人》 introduces the concrete figure of a hunter and the setting of the wilderness. It thus reconstructs a broader narrative and visual field involving survival, struggle with nature, and return, making the title more accessible and commercially legible to Chinese audiences.

Example 10: Inception

Literal translation: 《植入》

Target title: 《盗梦空间》

“Inception” is an abstract noun with a highly compressed semantic range. The literal “植入” does not immediately identify the film’s central narrative. 《盗梦空间》 expands the concept into the action “盗梦” (“dream theft”) and the setting-like noun “空间” (“space”). The title consequently makes the film’s central premise and science-fiction atmosphere more readily accessible.

Abstract-to-Concrete Transformation

English titles often condense meaning into abstract nouns or broad conceptual expressions. Retrospective expansion can convert these concepts into concrete actions, objects, or sensory images that are easier to process in Chinese.

Example 11: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Literal translation: 《无瑕心灵的永恒阳光》

Target title: 《暖暖内含光》

The English title is an abstract and metaphorically dense phrase. The literal rendering is grammatically possible but stylistically opaque in Chinese. 《暖暖内含光》 replaces the abstract conceptual formulation with sensory images of warmth and light. The result is more concrete, poetic, and compatible with Chinese preferences for imagery.

Example 12: Up

Literal translation: 《向上》

Target title: 《飞屋环游记》

“Up” is a single directional word with a deliberately open semantic range. 《飞屋环游记》 adds the concrete carrier “飞屋” (“flying house”) and the action “环游” (“travel around”), transforming an abstract direction into a vivid narrative scene. The expanded title also signals the film’s animated adventure genre more clearly.

Object-to-Event Transformation

English titles frequently use a person, object, or thematic label as the central nominal element. Chinese film titles often benefit from a more event-oriented formulation. Object-to-event transformation therefore converts a static designation into a narrative suggestion.

Example 13: Forrest Gump

Literal translation: 《福雷斯·甘》

Target title: 《阿甘正传》

The English title consists primarily of a character’s name. A transliterated title communicates the identity of the protagonist but provides little information about the narrative form. 《阿甘正传》 retains the character through the familiar name “阿甘” and adds “正传,” which suggests a biographical account of the character’s life. The title therefore transforms a static name into a narrative proposition.

Example 14: The Green Mile

Literal translation: 《绿色走廊》

Target title: 《绿里奇迹》

The Green Mile refers to a concrete place or passage. A literal translation offers limited narrative information. 《绿里奇迹》 retains the spatial reference “绿里” while adding “奇迹,” transforming the place into a setting in which a significant story or extraordinary event unfolds. This expansion increases the title’s narrative and emotional resonance in Chinese.

Comparative-to-Positive Transformation

English titles can explicitly encode evaluation through comparative or superlative forms. Chinese titles often express evaluation more indirectly and may favor a positive description or image that allows the audience to infer the evaluative meaning.

Example 15: The Better Angels

Literal translation: 《更好的天使》

Target title: 《天使的微笑》

The comparative “Better” explicitly marks an evaluative difference. A literal translation sounds direct and somewhat stiff in Chinese. 《天使的微笑》 replaces the explicit comparison with the concrete image of a smile. The image implies kindness, warmth, and goodness without stating the evaluation directly, creating a more understated emotional tone.

Example 16: The Great Gatsby

Literal translation: 《伟大的盖茨比》

Target title: 《了不起的盖茨比》

The adjective “Great” directly evaluates the protagonist. “伟大的盖茨比” is semantically accurate but can sound overly solemn and explicit. “了不起的盖茨比” preserves the positive evaluation while using a more colloquial and nuanced Chinese expression. The title therefore softens the explicitness of the source evaluation and produces a more accessible characterization.

Applicability, Limitations, and Methodological Reflection

The preceding analysis indicates that prospective compression and retrospective expansion have substantial explanatory and practical value for bidirectional film title translation. Nevertheless, neither strategy should be treated as a universal rule. Their effectiveness depends on genre, cultural context, communicative purpose, and the semantic resources of individual titles.

First, prospective compression does not mean that shorter is always better or that information should be deleted to the greatest possible extent. Its central purpose is to restructure processual meaning, abstract concepts, and nominal categories so that the target title has clearer semantic boundaries and greater

communicative self-sufficiency. If compression is applied without identifying the source title's central communicative value, the result may become overly generic and lose important thematic information. The translator must therefore identify the result-oriented core that has genuine communicative value rather than mechanically deleting all processual elements.

Second, retrospective expansion also has clear limits. Adding processes, images, or contextual cues can improve accessibility and imagery, but excessive expansion may shift meaning or misrepresent the film. This is particularly important for genre films and concept-driven works, where excessive narrative supplementation may turn a concise title into an overly plot-oriented one. Retrospective expansion should therefore serve semantic explication rather than semantic invention: it should recover meanings implicit in the source rather than introduce unsupported narrative judgments.

Third, the two strategies are not mutually exclusive techniques but components of a direction-sensitive framework arising from Chinese-English differences. Their value lies less in prescribing fixed equivalents than in helping translators choose an appropriate cognitive and semantic direction: meaning tends to be condensed and delimited in Chinese-to-English translation, whereas it may be unfolded and concretized in English-to-Chinese translation. The framework can therefore support global decision-making about translation direction, target-language expectations, and semantic restructuring.

Finally, film titles are highly functional texts located at the intersection of linguistic norms, cultural aesthetics, and market communication. Both prospective compression and retrospective expansion should ultimately serve the actual communicative effect of the target title rather than become mechanical procedures detached from context. Their use must therefore remain grounded in close textual analysis and cultural reception.

Discussion

The case analysis suggests that the eight transformation paths examined in this study can be understood as manifestations of a broader target-language adaptation principle. In Chinese-to-English translation, processual and image-based meanings are frequently reorganized into more delimited results, concepts, or nominal categories. In English-to-Chinese translation, highly condensed concepts are frequently unpacked into images, actions, settings, or narrative suggestions. This directional contrast corresponds to the process-versus-result and weak-versus-strong boundary distinctions emphasized in [Wang's \(2025\)](#) contrastive framework.

At the same time, the examples demonstrate that successful film title translation is not determined by linguistic contrast alone. Cultural associations and marketing considerations can motivate departures from literal semantic correspondence. Titles such as "Kaili Blues," "A Cool Fish," and 《盗梦空间》 illustrate that target-oriented effectiveness may require a substantial restructuring of the source title. Such departures are most defensible when they preserve or reconstruct the film's central thematic, emotional, or genre-related information.

The analysis also reveals the need to distinguish between a theoretical strategy and an individual translation solution. A title may involve more than one operation simultaneously. For example, 《盗梦空间》 combines concretization with event-oriented

expansion, while "Wolf Warrior" combines event-to-object transformation with genre specification. Prospective compression and retrospective expansion should therefore be regarded as analytical tendencies rather than rigid one-to-one translation rules.

Conclusion

The contrast between Chinese and English in process orientation, result orientation, and semantic boundary marking has important implications for bidirectional film title translation. In Chinese-to-English translation, prospective compression can be operationalized through four major paths: process-to-result, concrete-to-abstract, event-to-object, and positive-comparison-to-comparative transformation. By condensing processual meaning and strengthening semantic boundaries, these operations can produce concise and target-oriented English titles. In English-to-Chinese translation, retrospective expansion can be operationalized through result-to-process, abstract-to-concrete, object-to-event, and comparative-to-positive transformation. By recovering implicit processes, images, and narrative suggestions, these operations can make English titles more accessible and evocative in Chinese.

The eight paths examined here are particularly relevant to the functional requirements of film titles, including brevity, thematic communication, genre identification, and cross-cultural accessibility. They offer a practical reference for translators dealing with problems such as literal redundancy, insufficient target-language naturalness, and cultural barriers.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample contains only 16 film titles. Although the cases include commercial, artistic, and genre films, animated films, documentaries, and less widely distributed works are underrepresented. The generalizability of the findings is therefore limited. Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative analysis of selected examples and does not incorporate audience surveys, corpus-based frequency analysis, or quantitative evaluation of translation effects.

Future research could construct a larger bilingual corpus of film titles and quantitatively examine the distribution of these transformation paths across genres, including animation, documentary, and less mainstream films. Audience reception studies using questionnaires and interviews could also test whether the proposed strategies improve comprehension, aesthetic response, and communicative effectiveness. Such evidence would further refine the practical value of contrastive Chinese-English analysis in audiovisual translation.

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