



# Subtitling Chinese Animated Films under Functional Equivalence: A Case Study of *Nobody*

Wang Xuyuan<sup>1</sup>, Chen Shuangyu<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor and Master's Supervisor, School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract**— Chinese animated films are increasingly visible on the global stage, yet their cross-cultural communication depends heavily on effective subtitle translation. This study examines the English subtitles of the 2025 animated film *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪), analyzing idioms and proverbs, metaphors and figurative language, comic effects and culture-bound terms. Guided by Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, the research highlights how unidiomatic renderings and inadequate cultural transfer weaken communicative impact. The findings suggest that adaptive strategies are essential for achieving equivalence in audience response and enhancing the global dissemination of Chinese animation.

**Keywords**— *Subtitling; Functional Equivalence; Chinese animation; Nobody; Cross-cultural communication*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese animated films have recently gained wider global recognition, reflecting both artistic creativity and cultural influence. Yet their international reach depends not only on visuals but also on the quality of subtitle translation. Subtitles act as a bridge between languages and cultures but face strict time and space constraints, often leading to loss of nuance. This study analyzes the English subtitles of *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪), focusing on strategies, effectiveness, and how they shape audience understanding and reception.

## II. CURRENT SITUATION AND CONSTRAINTS OF SUBTITLE TRANSLATION FOR *NOBODY*

In China, subtitle translation studies have focused on strategies, norms, and cultural transfer. Zhao (2005) stressed that subtitles must adapt to strict temporal and spatial limits, while Li Y. (2001) outlined strategies such as omission, paraphrase, and substitution. Li H. (2005) emphasized the balance between adequacy and acceptability, showing how norms shape subtitling choices. Wang (2019) found that Chinese audiovisual translation has expanded significantly but remains largely theoretical. From an international view, Dong (2007) noted that Western research prioritizes audience reception, and Abdelaal (2019) showed that literal translations of

culture-bound terms often mislead audiences.

Constraints are particularly evident in animated films, which rely on humor, wordplay, and cultural allusions. Zhao (2005) observed that reduction often leads to loss of nuance, while Zheng highlighted the dual demands of intralingual clarity and interlingual transfer. Li Y.'s strategies may ease technical pressure but risk weakening cultural resonance, and Li H. (2005) warned that prioritizing acceptability can dilute authenticity. Abdelaal's (2019) findings reinforce the need for adaptive approaches. Together, these insights show that subtitling animated films requires balancing readability, cultural fidelity, and audience engagement.

### III. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE AND ITS MEANS

Nida first introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence in *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), later refined as functional equivalence in *Language, Culture, and Translating* (2001). The theory emphasizes that translation should not be judged only by its formal accuracy but by the extent to which target audiences experience responses similar to those of source audiences. This orientation shifts attention from literal transfer to communicative effectiveness, making the theory especially relevant in audiovisual contexts where space and time are restricted.

Applied to subtitle translation, functional equivalence suggests that strategies must adapt to technical limits while preserving cultural meaning and audience engagement. Shao (2009) argued that this framework provides practical guidance for handling humor, colloquial expressions, and culture-bound terms in film subtitles. Means such as omission, paraphrase, explication, and cultural substitution are often necessary to achieve equivalence in effect. For animated films, functional equivalence ensures that subtitles remain concise yet effective, balancing readability with cultural resonance.

### IV. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE USED IN SUBTITLE TRANSLATION FOR NOBODY

Based on Functional Equivalence, this chapter

analyzes subtitles from *Nobody* through six strategies—omission, paraphrase, literal translation, explication, cultural substitution, and adaptive idioms—to assess how effectively they reproduce the audience response of the source text.

#### 1. Omission

Example 1: “他就是个狐朋狗友, 成天游手好闲。”  
Subtitle: He is just a bad friend, idle all day.

The vivid metaphor “狐朋狗友” is reduced to bad friend, which simplifies reading but erases humor and imagery. Li Yunxing (2001) noted omission can save space, yet it often sacrifices cultural color. Functional equivalence (Nida, 2001) fails here because Chinese audiences sense ridicule, while English audiences perceive only a neutral label. A phrase like worthless crony would retain brevity and evaluative tone.

Example 2: “人各有命, 天命难违。”

Subtitle: Everyone has a fate, and it cannot be resisted.

While accurate, the solemn cadence of a proverb is lost. Zhao (2005) observed that time-space constraints push subtitlers to simplify, but such reduction diminishes rhetorical impact. A more rhythmic alternative could align better with Nida's (2001) principle of functional effect.

#### 2. Paraphrase

Example 1: “他在家里是个窝里横, 在外面却唯唯诺诺。”  
Subtitle: He is a bully at home but timid outside.

Paraphrase clarifies meaning, but the satirical sting of “窝里横” disappears. Shao (2009) stressed that subtitles should preserve communicative function; in this case, functional equivalence is weakened.

Example 2: “神仙打架, 凡人遭殃。”

Subtitle: When gods fight, people suffer.

The paraphrase delivers content but flattens proverbial rhythm. Wang (2019) noted that Chinese subtitling research often prioritizes strategies over audience reception, which explains why rhetorical force is neglected. According to Nida (1964), functional equivalence requires not only semantic but also stylistic effect, which here is compromised.

#### 3. Literal Translation

Example 1: “别去打架了, 你就是去送人头的。”

Subtitle: Don't fight, you are just going to give away

### heads.

The literal rendering misleads audiences, since “送人头” in colloquial and gaming contexts means “to die pointlessly.” Abdelaal (2019) argued that culture-bound terms cannot be handled through literal transfer without risking misinterpretation. This example illustrates his concern: instead of evoking humorous fatalism, the English evokes grotesque imagery. Nida (1964) emphasized that translation should secure equivalent audience response rather than verbal correspondence, which here clearly fails. A functional equivalent such as you’ll just be cannon fodder would better match the source’s pragmatic effect.

Example 2: “他只是个无名小卒, 没人会记得他。”

Subtitle: He is just a nobody, no one will remember him.

Although it is accurate, “nobody” flattens nuance, since “无名小卒” implies rank insignificance. Zhao (2005) noted that reductions often erode cultural depth. Functional equivalence (Nida, 2001) requires preserving evaluative tone. A version like a mere foot soldier would better convey the sense of lowly obscurity.

### 4. Explication

Example: “小心, 那是个妖怪!”

Subtitle: Be careful, that’s a Yao, a supernatural creature!

If rendered only as “Yao”, many foreign audiences may mistake it for a personal name or leave it uninterpreted, losing the tension the scene builds. Explication—a Yao, a supernatural creature—ensures comprehension by briefly defining the culturally loaded term. Nida (2001) emphasized that functional equivalence relies on audience response, while Shao (2009) noted that concise interpretation helps bridge cultural gaps in audiovisual translation. Here, the gloss allows international audiences to experience the same shock and fear as Chinese audiences, while keeping the subtitle within spatial limits.

### 5. Cultural Substitution

Example 1: “你这样的人, 简直就是费鞋。”

Subtitle: You are just dead weight.

Literal “waste shoes” would puzzle audiences. Substituting “dead weight” conveys contempt naturally. Li H. (2005) stressed the conflict between adequacy and

acceptability; here substitution favors acceptability and fulfills functional equivalence by eliciting the same disdainful response as the source.

Example 2: “大王来了, 大家快跪下!”

Subtitle: The chief is here, kneel down!

Translating “大王” as king would exaggerate authority. Using “chief” captures the comic image of a local strongman. Dong (2007) noted that Western subtitling studies focus on audience reception, which supports this register adjustment. It aligns target audiences’ perception with the humorous awe intended by the source.

### 6. Adaptive Idioms

Example: “你去打仗, 不就是送人头吗?”

Subtitle: You’re just cannon fodder in the fight.

The original uses gaming slang, “送人头”, to mock someone as doomed to die meaninglessly. A literal version like “give away heads” would confuse or even horrify target audiences, creating the wrong effect. By adapting it to the English idiom cannon fodder, the subtitle captures both the derisive humor and the sense of futility. Abdelaal (2019) observed that idiomatic adaptation prevents cultural distortion, and Nida (1964) stressed that equivalence rests on audience response. Here, the English viewer, like the Chinese viewer, perceives the speaker’s mocking fatalism, showing successful functional equivalence.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the English subtitles of *Nobody* (浪浪山小妖怪) through the lens of Functional Equivalence. The analysis showed that omission, paraphrase, and literal translation often weakened cultural nuance, while explication, substitution, and adaptive idioms improved clarity and preserved humor. As Nida (1964, 2001) emphasized, effective translation must secure comparable audience response. For animated films rich in culture-bound terms, functional equivalence provides practical guidance to balance brevity, readability, and cultural resonance in subtitle translation.

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