

Original Paper

A Contrastive Study of Chinese-English Translation of Ancient Poetry from the Perspective of Aesthetics of Reception: A Case Study of the Two Translations of Vain Longing

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Abstract

The Chinese literary classic "Dream of the Red Chamber" features a variety of poems and songs, with "Vain Longing," which serves as its theme song, being particularly popular among readers both domestically and internationally. Among the many translations available, those by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, along with Hawkes' version, are the most prominent and hold significant research value. Acceptance Aesthetics, which emerged from the German critical school in the 20th century, provides a fresh lens through which to view the translation of ancient Chinese poetry. This paper utilizes Aesthetics of reception as its theoretical framework and focuses on the English translations of "Vain Longing" by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang as well as Hawkes found in "Dream of the Red Chamber." By examining their translation philosophies and approaches, this study aims to contribute insights for translating ancient poetry within literary contexts while enhancing global appreciation for Chinese poetic beauty and promoting classical Chinese culture.

Keywords

Dream of the Red Chamber, Vain Longing, Aesthetics of reception, Literary Translation, Ancient Poetry Translation

1. Introduction

One of the four great classical novels of China, "Dream of the Red Chamber", has always been comparable to the works of Shakespeare in the West. In recent years, with the development of the Internet, "Dream of the Red Chamber" has continuously sparked enthusiasm overseas, attracting more foreign readers. The abundant ancient poems with rich implications it contains have received numerous

praises. Among them, the theme song of "Dream of the Red Chamber", "Vain Longing", as the most classic poem, has been widely sung and popular. Currently, the two most representative English translations of "Vain Longing" are the joint translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, and the translation by Hawkes (hereinafter referred to as Yang's translation and Hawkes' translation respectively). In recent years, literary translation practice has received increasing attention from translators, playing a significant role in "telling good Chinese stories and spreading Chinese culture". The translation of ancient poems in literary translation has always been a challenging aspect. How to convey the original meaning of the poems while enabling readers to appreciate their beauty has always been the research direction for scholars.

Before the integration of reception aesthetics into the field of literary translation, the traditional translation circle mainly focused on the unidirectional "original text - translation" approach, ignoring the role of the translator in this process. Additionally, due to translation theories such as the "equivalence theory" proposed by some early translation masters, most translators pursued a rather mechanical restoration of the author's original text during the translation process. Under the guidance of such translation theories, the translation of literary works was severely hindered. Literature, as an important component of translation, differs from political and economic translations. It requires the translator to play an active role during the translation process. After grasping the original text, the translator should combine their own feelings and understanding, and consider the readers' proficiency level in advance, flexibly utilize vocabulary, sentence structure, and cultural explanations, etc., to achieve better translation results.

In view of this, this paper applies aesthetics of reception to the English translation of the ancient poem "Vain Longing" in "Dream of the Red Chamber", aiming to provide theoretical guidance and practical experience for the translation strategies of ancient poems by comparing the versions of Yang's translation and Hawkes' translation, and promoting Chinese classical culture to the world.

2. The Essential Concepts of Reception Aesthetics

In the 1960s and 1970s, German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser jointly proposed the theory of reception aesthetics. This theory takes the reader's perspective as its starting point and emphasizes the reader's reaction to and aesthetic experience of the text, which has had a significant impact on translation studies.

Reception aesthetics emphasizes the distinction between "literary text" and "literary work". Before a text is subjectively and actively engaged by a reader, it is merely an objective, independent entity outside the subject that stores various aesthetic information and linguistic symbols. However, when a reader actively recognizes and appreciates the text, the text integrates the reader's aesthetic experience and emotions, and it no longer exists in isolation. Instead, it is integrated into the psychological structure and thought-emotional state of the accepting subject, transforming from the author-text to the reader-work, which is the result of aesthetic perception.

The core concepts of reception aesthetics include "expectation horizon" and "invitation structure". The concept of "expectation horizon" was first proposed by Hans Robert Jauss. It mainly refers to the potential aesthetic expectations of the reader before reading and understanding a work. That is, before reading a literary work, a reader will form a potential aesthetic expectation based on their past experiences, interests, cultural background, gender, age, occupation, etc., and thus display a certain tendency and aesthetic pursuit, which comes from the "expectation horizon" of the reader. The level of expectation of the reader is generated by the appearance of the translated work and is not only influenced by the reader's previous reading experience, but also to a large extent depends on the style of the text. The knowledge and experience acquired by the reader gradually form the reader's horizon. The literary work itself also has a horizon. Due to the differences in cultural background, a gap exists between the two horizons, and this gap is irreconcilable. Nevertheless, readers can shorten the distance between themselves and the original work by reading the translation, enabling the two horizons to collide and merge. It can be said that the translator plays a vital role in the process of horizon fusion. The concept of "the structure of textual summons" was proposed by Wolfgang Iser, who expected that readers could achieve a profound integration with the text through reading, rebuild the structure of textual summons, and motivate the enthusiasm of readers for individualized processing of the text. It can be stated that all these have brought new perspectives to literary research and literary translation.

3. The Poem "Vain Longing"

"Vain Longing" is a judgmental poem in the renowned classical Chinese novel "Dream of the Red Chamber". It originates from the fifth chapter of the novel. This poem utilizes "discussing romance" to "address politics", demonstrating the author's lament over decline and expressing his likes and dislikes. Despite the author's limitations due to the era and class, having insufficient estimation of the strong vitality of new things and being unable to envision a political way out to escape the fate of destruction, thus transforming the praise of feudal rebels into a poignant elegy. Nevertheless, through distinct expressions of likes and dislikes and commendation and censure, the author fully manifested his criticism of the feudal society. The following is the original text:

一个是阆苑仙葩，一个是美玉无瑕。

若说没奇缘，今生偏又遇着他；

若说有奇缘，如何心事终虚化？

一个枉自嗟呀，一个空劳牵挂。

一个是水中月，一个是镜中花。

想眼中能有多少泪珠儿，怎禁得秋流到冬尽，春流到夏！

Yang's translation:

VAIN LONGING

One is an immortal flower of fairyland

The other fair flawless jade

And were it not predestined
Why should they meet again in this existence?
Yet, if predestined
Why does their love come to nothing?
One sighs to no purpose
The other yearns in vain;
One is the moon reflected in the water
The other but a flower in the mirror。
How many tears can well from her eyes?
Can they flow on from autumn till winter
From spring till summer?

Hawkes's translation:

HOPE BETRAYED

One was a flower from paradise
One a pure jade without spot or stain
If each of the other one was not intended
Then why in this life did they meet again?
And yet if fate had meant them for each other
why was their earthly meeting all in vain?
In vain were all his anxious fears:
All insubstantial doomed to pass
As moonlight mirrored in the water
Or flowers reflected in a glass
How many tears from those poor eyes could flow
Which every season rained upon her woe?

4. Comparative Analysis of the English Translations of "Vain Longing"

4.1 Comparison of Translation Ideologies

Dai Naidi once stated, "It seems that we are translating for unidentified individuals. We translate for all English speakers." Thus, Yang's translation has no specific targeted readers. It merely presents an English version without concerning the identity, cognition, and cultural level of the readers. Therefore, for them, the core of their translation ideology is to enable more foreign readers to know and understand China's classical culture through their expressions. The emphasis in translation lies in the faithful presentation of the original content. However, Hawkes' translation is aimed at Western readers. The core of his ideology is to introduce a novel with distinct Chinese characteristics and rich Chinese culture to Western readers. Therefore, in the translation process, he must consider the acceptance ability of Western readers towards Chinese culture and pay more attention to the effect of cross-cultural

communication and dissemination.

4.2 Comparison of Translation Contents

4.2.1 Lexical Level

Firstly, concerning the translation of the title "枉凝眉", the Yang translation is "vain longing", while the Hawkes translation is "hope betrayed". It is not hard to notice that the two versions have completely different expressions of the connotation of the word "枉". The Yang translation directly uses the word "vain" to correspond to the meaning of "枉" in the Chinese character, expressing a sense of helplessness due to futility; while the Hawkes translation, considering the ending of "Dream of the Red Chamber" where Lin Daiyu witnesses Jia Baoyu marrying Xue Baochai, betraying her true love and eventually dying with resentment, interprets "枉" as the betrayal of Jia Baoyu's love for her, thus choosing the word "betrayed". Here, we can observe that the Hawkes translation takes into account the artistic conception of the entire poem, presenting both the surface and deep meanings of "枉" vividly on the paper, and indirectly confirming that the scenes and people encountered in the following text are all "unintended gains". It meets the aesthetic expectations of the target readers and facilitates their grasping of the emotional tone of the entire poem.

Secondly, regarding the content of the poem, the first line of the original reads, "一个是阆苑仙葩，一个是美玉无瑕" It implies that "Lin Daiyu is the reincarnation of the fairy flower from the Langyuan Garden, while Jia Baoyu is actually the reincarnation of a stubborn rock." This is an introduction to the previous identities of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu, which is closely related to the content of the book. The main difficulty in translation lies in the phrase "阆苑仙葩". "阆苑" is a legendary place where immortals reside. It is said to be located at the peak of Mount Kunlun and is the residence of the Queen Mother of the West. In poetry, it is often used to refer to the place where immortals dwell and sometimes represents the imperial garden. The Yang translation renders "阆苑仙葩" as "immortal flower of fairyland". It is obvious that the Yang translation translates "xian" as "immortal". In the Collins English-Chinese Dictionary, the explanation of "immortal" is "someone or something that is famous and likely to be remembered for a long time". The English explanation emphasizes a state of eternal existence, which, although somewhat corresponding to the meaning of "仙" in Chinese which implies special abilities and immortality, still has certain differences. This mostly reflects the immortality of immortals, but fails to well represent the mythical image and special abilities of immortals.

The Yang translation employs this word. Although it does not facilitate readers' profound understanding of the cultural term "仙葩" in Chinese classical culture and reduces the charm and classical significance inherent in the word itself, it thereby generates what is termed "frustration of reading expectations" in reception theory. When the plot development is inconsistent with what readers anticipate, it evokes the active filling of the "gap" contained within the text by English readers, which triggers them to conduct further research and reflection on this topic, acquire more knowledge about Chinese classical culture, and provide a better reading experience. "葩" is directly translated as "flower", and "阆苑" is translated

as "fairyland", which flexibly corresponds to Chinese cultural traditions and the thinking habits of the Chinese people. For this part, Hawkes' translation is "One was a flower from paradise". Hawkes translates "阆苑" as the Western-colored "paradise", which conforms to the Western expression habit for "fairyland", namely "heaven". It can be observed that in terms of aesthetic expectations, the Hawkes translation does not impose overly high requirements, hoping that Western readers can grasp the general meaning without affecting the overall comprehension.

For English readers, the term "奇缘" in the poem actually presents a cultural chasm between China and the West. As "缘" stems from a religious term and is equivalent to "predestination" or "fate" in Chinese culture. An ancient Chinese adage states, "Those far away are due to fate; those close by are due to cause." It represents an intangible connection among people. In Confucianism and Taoism, there is also the notion of opportunity and fate. Hence, it is arduous to find an exact equivalent term in foreign languages. To convey the information in the original text more effectively and restore the aesthetic ambience of "Vain Longing", Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang adopted the strategy of reception aesthetics, shifting their focus from the text to the reader. For the recurrent term "奇缘", the Yang translation is "predestined", expressing a sense of predetermination, which is equivalent to "yuan". In the Hawkes translation, "not intended" and "fate" are employed, which also explain and elucidate the term "yuan", highlighting a sense of "unexpected encounter in a previous life and predestined fate in this life", imparting a sense of helplessness due to fate. Such translations not only afford English readers ample imaginative space but also appropriately reproduce the overall emotional tone of the original poem, enabling the translated readers to engage in the English re-creation of the text. To obtain a complete reading experience, readers will consciously or unconsciously resort to association, further comprehend the corresponding cultural background of their own nation, and conduct spontaneous practices of "filling in" the text. In this virtuous interaction, the latent meaning of "Vain Longing" is ultimately actualized, achieving the effect of "words being exhausted but the meaning being boundless".

The final line of the poem, "想眼中能有多少泪珠儿，怎禁得秋流到冬尽，春流到夏！" expresses an intense inner anguish and plaintive lament over the ultimate failure of the lovers to unite, possessing a potent artistic allure. It is the emotional apex of the poem and a translation conundrum. Firstly, in Yang's translation, it reads, "How many tears can well from her eyes? Can they flow on from autumn till winter from spring till summer?" The first half of the sentence employs a rhetorical question, translated as "How many tears have flowed from her eyes?" to depict Lin Daiyu's ceaseless weeping and extreme sorrow, evoking pity and sighs. The second half, "from autumn till winter from spring till summer", refrains from omitting the translation of the four seasons but presents them layer by layer and step by step, creating a profoundly sorrowful scene that guides readers into the picture and further enables them to apprehend the plaintive lament behind it, achieving a high degree of harmony between the scene and the emotion. This ingenious English translation not only surpasses the readers' expectations but also vividly reproduces the poet's emotional transformation on paper. The Hawkes translation is "How many tears from those poor eyes could flow. Which every season rained upon her

woe?" He did not simply translate "眼中泪珠" as "tears from eyes" but considered the reading cognition of Western readers and the overall artistic conception of the poem, adding the adjective "poor" to vividly present Lin Daiyu's image and emotions on paper, echoing the melancholic emotional tone of the poem. It meets the aesthetic expectations of the target readers and facilitates their grasping of the overall emotional tone of the poem.

4.2.2 Discourse Level

The entire poem primarily delineates the story where the "love ideal" of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, the male and female leads in "Dream of the Red Chamber," ultimately crumbles due to various causes, with Lin Daiyu passing away in tears. The first line of the original text initially presents the symbolic past lives of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu, and then describes their "extraordinary predestined relationship" in clause form. The third and fourth lines employ a contrastive approach to portray the distinct circumstances and destinies of the two, with emotions intensifying layer by layer. The final sentence summarizes the entire text, expressing a sentimental lament over their tragic ending. The poem adopts the technique of initially elevating and subsequently suppressing, with mutual contrast, to reveal the inner pain of those who suffered persecution in the feudal society and were unable to unite in love. It continuously conveys a sorrowful and plaintive mood, exerting a powerful artistic allure.

The first sentence of Yang's translation employs the structure of "one is... the other is...", as opposed to the "one... one..." utilized separately in the Hawkes' translation. Yang's version takes into account the "love ideal" relationship of mutual affection between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu in the original work, deeming them interconnected. This enables readers to generate aesthetic anticipation regarding their relationship during reading and is more conducive to grasping the emotions of the entire poem. Conversely, Hawkes' "one... one..." suggests that the two are unconnected, being two separate individuals, lacking the beauty of artistic conception.

In the second sentence, Yang's translation transforms the two clauses into two short phrases, and uses "yet" to express the contrast between the two different suppositions. Both "having" and "without" a predestined relationship are expressed with "predestined", and a question is ultimately employed to govern the overall structure, presenting a neat sentence pattern and aesthetic form. The sentence structure in Hawkes' translation is largely similar to Yang's. However, at the conclusion, the use of "again" and "vain" in Hawkes' translation adds a rhythmic beauty, offering readers a superior reading experience.

The third and fourth sentences reflect the different emotional experiences of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu. Yang's translation still employs the structure of "one... the other...". When translating the phrases “枉自嗟呀”、“空劳牵挂”、“水中花”“镜中月”, the same sentence structure is utilized for each pair, intensifying the contrast between the two and providing readers with a more intuitive perception. In Hawkes' translation, the focus was not on the contrast and correlation between the two characters but rather on the description of the text itself. The spiritual pain of “枉自嗟呀”、“空劳牵挂” was expressed using the shortest words. Both translation versions fulfill readers' aesthetic expectations on different

levels.

In the final sentence, both Yang's translation and Hawkes' translation conclude with a rhetorical question, aiming to reinforce the tragic and lamentable sentiment in this poem, which is an excellent translation choice. However, the subtle distinction lies in the choice of the main subject in the two translation versions. Yang's translation centers on "they", namely Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, which prompts readers to associate with the tragic fates of the two when reading. In contrast, Hawkes' translation makes "tears" the main subject, allowing readers to be more immersed in the sentiment of sadness when reading.

4.2.3 Techniques Level

From the foregoing analysis, it is not hard to observe that Yang's translation and Hawkes' translation each have their own characteristics in terms of the overall style. Consequently, the translation methods employed in the two versions differ. Both translations utilize methods such as "amplification", "omission", "shift", and "combination" to convey the emotions and cultural connotations of the poem. However, in addition to these, through the analysis of the translation versions of "阆苑仙葩"、"奇缘"、"眼中泪珠"、"秋流到冬尽" and "春流到冬", it can be seen that Yang's translation is, on the whole, more faithful to the ideas of the original work. "Literal translation" is his main translation approach and leans towards "semantic translation", while Hawkes' translation is more inclined towards "communicative translation". Nevertheless, both strive to express the classical poetic sentiment contained in the original poem, enabling readers to acquire the same aesthetic psychology as the original readers through the translator's interpretation and fulfilling the aesthetic expectations in reception aesthetics.

5. Conclusion

As a classic ancient poem in "Dream of the Red Chamber", "Vain Longing" is rich in cultural connotations and emotional expressions. Different from the translation of other literary forms, poetry translation is not only a process of cross-language and cross-cultural communication but also one of literary reception and reconstruction. For Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, the target audience of Chinese ancient poetry is English native speakers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Therefore, for these people, understanding the cultural imagery and emotions in the translated poem is their primary expectation. Thus, Yang's translation reproduces both the meaning and the form of the poem, allowing foreign readers to comprehensively experience the charm of Chinese poetry. They integrate their existing perspective on Chinese culture with the original poem, pay attention to reconstructing the "textual appeal structure", and thereby satisfy the "horizon of expectations" of the readers, bridging the gap between Chinese and foreign cultures and embodying the core of reception aesthetics theory. This not only reflects the translator's translation ability and aesthetic level but also enhances the readers' aesthetic experience. It can be seen from Hawkes' translation that he approaches the translation of Chinese ancient poetry from the perspective of a Western scholar, combines the language expression

habits of foreign readers, and endeavors to present the connotations of cultural imagery. While enhancing the readers' aesthetic experience, he also pays attention to their reading feelings.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, in addition to the basic function of language conversion, translation work should fully consider factors such as culture, ideology, and values contained between the lines. It requires translators to start from the target readers, select translation strategies suitable for the target readers, meet their horizon of expectations, and achieve the fusion of horizons among the poem, the translator, and the readers. In the future, translators should continuously enhance their mastery of language and cultural knowledge, improve their translation ability and aesthetic experience, reconstruct the "textual appeal structure" with their existing perspective, help readers eliminate cultural uncertainties, promote Chinese classical culture, and enable Chinese ancient poetry to better step onto the international stage and be known to more people.

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