

Original Paper

Revisiting Color Term Translation in Xu Yuanchong's English Rendition of Song Ci Poetry

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Received: October 13, 2025 Accepted: November 17, 2025 Online Published: November 20, 2025

doi:10.22158/eltls.v7n6p16 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v7n6p16>

Abstract

Song Ci, a quintessential Chinese cultural form, features color terms rich in connotations and emotions, posing significant translation challenges. Xu Yuanchong's renditions are widely acclaimed for retaining the original's essence while catering to target language readers (hereinafter TL readers), fully showcasing their aesthetic value. However, research on the translation of color terms in the field remains relatively scarce. Thus, this study focuses on horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance. It employs Reception Aesthetics as its theoretical framework to qualitatively analyze color term translations in Xu's works, using descriptive, interpretive, and comparative methods. The findings reveal that, under the guidance of Reception Aesthetics, the translator should understand the TL readers' horizons of expectation, balance between filling in and retaining indeterminacy of the text, and consider an appropriate aesthetic distance. These three aspects collectively achieve a reader-centered translation goal, enhancing the TL readers' understanding and maximizing the literary value of *Song Ci*. This study aims to deepen the understanding of color term translation in *Song Ci*, providing valuable insights for translators and contributing to the translation and dissemination of other Chinese classical poetry.

Keywords

Reception Aesthetics, Xu Yuanchong, English translation of *Song Ci*, color terms

1. Introduction

In Chinese poetry, *Song Ci* exhibits a masterful use of color terms. Over centuries of development, the Chinese language has evolved, with color words not only describing specific colors but also carrying rich cultural connotations and functions in different contexts. This displays the charm of Chinese culture. In the field of *Song Ci* translation, Xu has made significant contributions, particularly in

handling color expressions. His rendition respects the original text while ensuring comprehensibility for the TL readers, making his works suitable and valuable for reader-centered Reception Aesthetics. Color terms in Song Ci are a crucial element of its artistic charm, and they play a significant role in the spread of culture and knowledge. These terms enrich the imagery and emotional expression of Song Ci, carrying profound cultural connotations. The classical and culturally specific nature of these colors, which differ significantly from modern usage, presents a significant challenge for translators. In the current context of promoting Chinese traditional culture, researching the translation of color terms in Song Ci is of great significance. This research helps accurately convey the artistic beauty and cultural value of Song Ci and contributes to cultural exchange, enhancing international understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

As a renowned translator of Song Ci, Xu is celebrated for his deep understanding of the original text's essence and skillful translation techniques in his renditions. Xu demonstrates his unique translation philosophy and methods in Song Ci translation. According to Xu (2006), "The Three Beauties Principle is the ontology of poetry translation". He values the aesthetic expression in poetry translation and emphasizes artistic recreation while being faithful to the original text, considering the TL readers' reception to achieve the best effect in the target language. This translation thought reflects his deep appreciation of the original text's aesthetic value and his application of Reception Aesthetics in translation practice. With meticulous language handling and subtle cultural transmission, Xu's translated versions fully realize the aesthetic value of Song Ci in language conversion.

Previous scholars have extensively studied Xu's translation thoughts, but few have specifically focused on how Xu handles color terms in Song Ci, and the relationship between Reception Aesthetics and his translation versions has been largely overlooked. To address this, this study aims to explore Xu's approach to translating color terms in Song Ci from the perspective of Reception Aesthetics. Selecting samples from the book *300 Song Lyrics: An Annotated Edition with Commentaries (Chinese-English)* and analyzing aspects of horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for the translation of Song Ci and other Chinese classical poetry, thereby promoting the dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.

2. Literature Review

Color term research exhibits distinct historical and modern characteristics, with studies primarily focusing on cross-cultural comparison and cultural connotations without systematic ties to Song Ci. In ancient China, people's understanding of color terms was relatively limited, with only a few terms formally defined. The earliest recorded mention of color terms in Chinese literature can be traced to *Shang Shu*, one of the oldest historical documents in China. Zhang Yanying and Wang Guoxuan (2012), in their annotated translation of *Shang Shu*, note that the Yu Gong chapter introduces the concept of "Wu Se" (five colors: green, red, yellow, white, black), which ancient scholars correlated with the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth)—a foundational theory in traditional Chinese cosmology that

was believed to explain the composition of the physical universe. In modern academic circles, research on color terms has expanded but still lacks focus on Song Ci; instead, scholars examine color terms in a more isolated manner. This body of literature can be broadly categorized into two main types.

The first category is the cross-cultural comparison of color terms. In China, scholars focus on understanding the cultural differences in color terms to enhance cross-cultural communication. For instance, Guo (2018) explores how different color terms are used in Chinese and English, concluding that these terms in both languages have a unique charm and rich cultural connotations. Internationally, scholars also center on cross-cultural studies of color terms, discovering cultural commonalities between the East and the West. Gage (1999) discusses the differences in the meanings of color terms across cultures. He conducts a cross-cultural comparison, including studies on color terms in different languages and cultures, highlighting the differences in symbolic meanings and perceptions. Besides, Adams and Osgood (1973) conduct a semantic differential study on the emotional meanings of colors in 23 cultures. Their data show that different cultures have similar perceptions of colors. Specifically, the concept of red is emotionally prominent; black and gray are seen as bad, while white, blue, and green are seen as good. The second category primarily explores the cultural connotations of colors. Both Chinese and international scholars conduct research in this area. While the number of studies is substantial, Chinese scholars excel in qualitative analysis, and international scholars in quantitative ones. Song Rui (2022) starts with the meaning and glyph of the color “yellow” to explore its cultural connotations. He finds that colors in Chinese vocabulary are rich in cultural meaning, reflecting people’s understanding and depiction of the objective world. Dai and Zhu (2021) focus on the term “red,” summarizing its primary and extended meanings. They analyze the impact of Chinese culture on “red” from two angles: “coloring objects” and “imparting meanings to colors.” They find that “red” uniquely reflects natural worship, privilege, folklore, and historical culture. Among international scholars, Kennedy and McNally (2010), through controlled experiments, discover that sentences containing color adjectives change their meaning depending on the context, even without other sources of ambiguity. This indicates the inherent indeterminacy of color terms’ meanings. Clarke and Costall (2008) summarize experimental data and conclude that color terms represent specific meanings, which can be concretized. Notably, their observations indicate that 69% of participants associate the colors orange and yellow with happiness. This suggests that despite a certain amount of research on the cross-cultural comparison and cultural connotations of color terms, most studies lack integration with specific literary contexts such as Song Ci.

In fact, research on the translation of color terms in Song Ci is even scarcer and more unsystematic. Currently, there are also two main types of studies on color term translation in Song Ci in China, and their quantity is very limited, requiring further research.

The first type involves scholars exploring the translation of color terms in Song Ci. These studies are few, but some are quite representative. For example, Hu and Li (2019) conduct a comparative analysis of the image equivalence of red color terms between the source texts and their English translations. The

research finds that in translating red color terms in Song Ci, there are three types of frame relationships between the color images activated by the source texts and those by the translations: complete equivalence, partial equivalence, and complete non-equivalence. The fundamental factors contributing to these similarities and differences in images lie in translators' individual experiences and the cultural gaps between the source and target languages. Moreover, Huang (2007) categorizes color terms in Song Ci into rhetorical and non-rhetorical types, and explores their English translation strategies. Specifically, the research proposes that non-rhetorical color terms are mostly translated literally, while those with unique cultural connotations adopt free translation; rhetorical color terms require preserving the original poetic charm by reflecting figures of speech such as metonymy and metaphor in English renditions. The second type of research focuses on how to improve the translation of color terms, covering a broader scope and being less specific than the first type. In these studies, Wang (2013) summarizes methods to improve the translation of color imagery, including replacing original imagery with equivalents in the target language, free translation to preserve implied meanings, literal translation, and annotations to retain original imagery, highlighting the nuanced approaches required in translating color terms in poetry. Zhou (2018) studies translation adjustments in Xu's English translations of Song Ci, analyzing his strategies from linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Specifically, the cultural dimension addresses the adaptive translation of cultural imagery embedded in color terms, such as how to facilitate English readers' understanding of the unique artistic conception of specific color terms in Song Ci through contextual adaptations. Therefore, it can be seen that existing research on the translation of color terms in Song Ci is rare and needs to be expanded to enhance its academic and cultural influence.

Although Xu's prominent status as a leading figure in Song Ci translation has attracted extensive domestic scholarly attention, existing research tends to focus on his translations themselves or other theories. More specifically, despite the considerable amount of literature on his translations of Song Ci, most studies investigate other elements in Song Ci, such as imagery and numbers. Meanwhile, these studies adopt a text-centered perspective of translation theories, to some extent neglecting the perspectives of readers' reception and the feasibility of Song Ci dissemination.

Some researchers analyze specific aspects of Xu's versions of Song Ci translation. For example, Li Wanna (2008) reveals that the use of numbers in Chinese classical poetry, especially in Song Ci, is flexible and diverse, serving various rhetorical functions and containing rich cultural connotations. Her article analyzes the rhetorical functions of numbers in poetry and suggests how to address common issues in number translation through literal translation, free translation, and annotation, based on an accurate understanding of the original poem. Additionally, Xue (2017) analyzes the translation strategies for core tragic images such as "falling flowers", "flowing water" and "wutong trees". The study notes that Xu does not merely rely on literal translation for these images; instead, he balances their literal meanings with the profound emotions. This provides an aesthetic reference paradigm for the translation of tragic images in Song Ci. Meanwhile, some researchers explore Xu's translation

theories, such as the Three Beauties Principle. For instance, Tang and Ye (2024) use the Three Beauties Principle as a guiding principle for translating a Tang poem into English. They conclude the translation strategies concerning imagery, rhyme, and sentence length from the aspects of “beauty in sense,” “beauty in sound,” and “beauty in form.” Their analysis shows that under the guidance of the theory, poetry translation becomes clearer, providing direction for translators in terms of meaning, sound, and form. Besides, Yang and Tian (2024) categorize cultural defaults in Song Ci into five types, including ecological, religious, and social defaults. Taking Xu’s English versions as the research sample, they analyze his compensation strategies for different cultural defaults. Through empirical analysis, this study confirms the applicability of Relevance Translation Theory in Song Ci translation and clearly demonstrates how Xu achieves cross-cultural communication through strategic adjustments. These studies, while insightful, share a common limitation: they either focus on non-color elements or rely on text-centered theories with no attention to color term translation or the guidance of Reception Aesthetics.

Generally speaking, current research gaps manifest in three main areas. First, existing studies primarily analyze the cross-cultural differences and cultural connotations of color terms but lack systematic research on these terms within a certain context. For example, analyzing color terms consistently within texts like Song Ci can provide a more systematic and detailed description of their connotations and roles. Second, there is insufficient research on color term translation in Song Ci; scholars tend to emphasize other components, including imagery and numbers, among others. However, color terms are very common in Song Ci, and their complexity adds to the difficulty of understanding these poems. Focusing on the translation of color terms can facilitate the translation and dissemination of the poetry and Chinese culture. Third, when translating color terms, most translators focus more on the text-centered perspective, paying less attention to the reader-centered one, and seldom consider the guidance of Reception Aesthetics. The application of Reception Aesthetics is highly compatible with Song Ci, which holds significant aesthetic value. This approach is crucial for enhancing the TL readers’ comprehension and conveying the beauty of the poetry, and its application should not be overlooked.

Therefore, this study, guided by Reception Aesthetics, analyzes the validity of Xu’s color term rendition of Song Ci by considering three basics: horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance, all of which center on the TL readers. By doing so, the study aims to fill some of the research gaps, introduce a novel theory of Song Ci translation, and promote the dissemination of the poetry overseas.

3. Reception Aesthetics

Zhou and Dai (2011) elaborate that Reception Aesthetics was developed on the theoretical foundations laid by predecessors, particularly intertwined with Hermeneutics, represented by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Phenomenology, represented by Roman Ingarden. For instance, the concept of “horizon of expectation” proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in Reception Aesthetics originates from

Gadamer's theories, while the concept of "indeterminacy of the text" introduced by Iser was adapted from Ingarden's theories. Therefore, understanding Hermeneutics and Phenomenology is essential to grasp Reception Aesthetics. Hermeneutics, formally established in the 19th century, centers around the idea that understanding is the core of the theory. Heidegger (1962) argues that "Dasein" (the being that understands its own existence, a core term in his ontology) is fundamentally characterized by "being-in-the-world"—and "understanding" is the existential mode of this "being-in-the-world". Understanding involves a process, beginning with a cognitive phase known as "pre-structure," which includes preconceived cultural habits, conceptual systems, and assumptions that influence understanding. This concept is akin to horizon of expectation in Reception Aesthetics. Additionally, Ingarden's concept of "schematic formation" in Phenomenology directly influenced the idea of indeterminacy of the text in Reception Aesthetics. Both theories posit that literary works are schematic constructs with inherent potential characteristics. Only when these works are concretized do they become aesthetic objects. Thus, to transform schematic literary works into aesthetic objects for readers, they must be concretized. Otherwise, the aesthetic value of literary works cannot be realized, their aesthetic potential remains untapped, and the aesthetic distance between readers and the work becomes irrelevant.

In a nutshell, Reception Aesthetics centers on the reader by considering horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance, valuing the reader's understanding of the work. Reader interpretation endows works with meaning, revolutionizing the reader's role and bringing significant changes to the fields of literary comprehension and research.

The concept of "horizon of expectation" was formally raised by Jauss and it is indispensable in Reception Aesthetics. It developed from Martin Heidegger's "pre-structure" or "pre-understanding" and Hans-Georg Gadamer's "prejudice" and "horizon". Jauss (1982) borrowed the concept of "pre-structure" and developed it into the "horizon of expectation". No literary piece ever introduces itself as entirely novel information; instead, it predisposes its audience towards a certain reception through explicit or implicit cues, recognizable traits, or subtle references. The initial encounter with a text often evokes previously experienced emotions, prompting readers to anticipate the narrative's development and conclusion. Reception Aesthetics, as a theory of literary criticism, gives priority to readers' role in literary understanding and interpretation. According to the theory, translators should take horizon of expectation into consideration when initiating translation work. The concept is composed of the readers' or audiences' previous cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria in the source language and culture at a given time. Put differently, regardless of whether a literary work has been previously engaged with, its content and structure won't be entirely alien to the audience. This familiarity stems from an existing framework of appreciation and comprehension within the reader's mind, known as horizon of expectation, which shapes their pre-reading perceptions and understanding of the work.

Therefore, horizon of expectation serves as the foundation for our understanding of works. Without such a pre-existing structure, we cannot evoke memories of past readings, anticipate the unfolding of narratives, or comprehend any piece of literature. Horizon of expectation functions in two key ways: on one hand, only when a literary work falls within the reader's horizons of expectation can its value be realized through understanding and interpretation. On the other hand, readers, as actively engaged subjects, must keep pace with the times, continually updating their horizons of expectation to grasp the profound value and meaning of the works.

“Spots of indeterminacy” is a core attribute of the “schematic formation” of literary works, systematically expounded by Roman Ingarden. In his view, it is the part that is not specifically determined by the text. He believes every object or event in a literary work contains a large number of points of indeterminacy. Iser (1978) further developed this concept into “indeterminacy of the text” (a broader notion linking structural gaps to readerly concretization). Later, Iser’s “blank” is a specific manifestation of “indeterminacy of the text”—it refers to the unstated connections between textual elements that require readers to actively fill in. Besides, the language in the literature is an expressive language with high aesthetic value, which contains great indeterminacy and blank space. It thus can be seen that indeterminacy is unavoidable, which is not the defect of the literary work but its inherent property, especially in the translation.

In this context, whenever a text fails to spontaneously respond to the reader's cues and questions during the reading process, a gap in communication between the text and the reader emerges. Consequently, all texts exhibit a degree of indeterminacy. This uncertainty and the presence of interpretive voids compel readers to seek out the meaning of the text, thereby granting them the right to participate in the construction of its meaning. Because of differences in education, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences, readers will naturally interpret the same text in diverse ways, enabling the work to achieve a multitude of aesthetic values.

As to aesthetic distance, Jauss (1982) regards that it largely determines the artistic value of a literary work. There is a certain limit to the aesthetic distance between the text and the reader. Before achieving the optimal aesthetic effect, and within the scope of the reader's comprehension, the greater the distance between the text's aesthetics and the reader's aesthetic orientation, the higher the aesthetic effect. However, if this distance continues to widen, the effect becomes counterproductive. Furthermore, if the work completely aligns with the reader's aesthetic standards, failing to evoke diverse aesthetic experiences or satisfy them, it indicates an absence of aesthetic distance between the poem and the reader, rendering the aesthetic value almost null. Consequently, a certain aesthetic distance should be maintained between the reader and the text, neither too close nor too far. If too close, the reader might find it easier to understand but may not fully appreciate the text's true artistic value. If too far, the reader might struggle to grasp the text's intent, potentially losing interest, leading to insufficient reading and comprehension, and thus diminishing the text's value.

In summary, the translation of color terms in Song Ci aligns closely with the principles of Reception Aesthetics. This theory highlights horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance, emphasizing the central role of the reader in interpreting and enriching the meaning of literary works to realize their highly aesthetic values. Firstly, color terms in Song Ci are imbued with rich Chinese cultural connotations. The translator must consider the TL readers' horizons of expectation, which include their cultural background, reading experiences and other relevant factors. Therefore, the translator engages in a profound interpretation of the source text through research and analysis, blending their perspective with that of the original author to strive for translations that are both high-quality and appealing to the audience. Moreover, it is acknowledged that all texts possess inherent indeterminacy, and Song Ci is no exception. Specifically, the color terms in Song Ci contain multiple meanings, depict various scenes, and express diverse emotions, which increases the indeterminacies within the text. Thus, considering indeterminacy of the text is particularly useful in guiding Song Ci translation. Finally, as a traditional work of Chinese aesthetics, the aesthetic value of Song Ci is significant, making aesthetic distance a crucial consideration and facilitating the expression of the beauty of the poetry. In this context, translations informed by Reception Aesthetics are particularly suitable for translating the color terms of Song Ci. Consequently, it is reasonable to approach color term rendition under the guidance of Reception Aesthetics.

4. Analysis of Color Term Translation Based on Reception Aesthetics

Reception Aesthetics has become one of the most influential theories in the field of literature since the 1960s. Focusing on the reader, the theory has opened new fields for scholars to study literary works and broadened the scope of literary research. Literary translation, including the translation of Song Ci and especially that of color terms, has increased the literary value of Song Ci translations.

The translation of color terms in Song Ci shares characteristics similar to those of the application of Reception Aesthetics; it is a dynamic process in which the translator inevitably faces the influence of two reception activities. In Ma Xiao's view, first, the translator's interaction with the text directly impacts the creation of the translation. Additionally, the translator must anticipate the reception and engagement of the TL readers with the translated text, thus influencing the translation process. Both reception activities involve subjective participation (Ma, 2000). For this reason, it is crucial to focus on horizon of expectation to ensure the TL readers' understanding of the work. The translator can either align the translation with the TL readers' comprehension to facilitate easier reading or choose to retain terms that do not meet their horizons of expectation, thus broadening their horizons and making them more adept at similar future readings. Compared to indeterminacy of the text and aesthetic distance, horizon of expectation is reflected in the difficulty of understanding the text during reading. Moreover, Song Ci exhibits characteristics of indeterminacy, with color terms amplifying the feature. However, the translator can fill in some gaps, providing the target readers with a more direct understanding of the text, or retain the indeterminacies to stimulate the audience's imagination. The impact of indeterminacy

of the text on the target readers lies in its ability to stimulate their understanding. Lastly, the TL readers enjoy a relatively high status, and maintain an appropriate aesthetic distance from the text. Different translations of color terms can result in varying degrees of comprehension, and the TL readers' interpretation can expand the meaning of the translated work. The translator's efforts to bridge or maintain the aesthetic distance contribute to realizing the aesthetic value of the work. Therefore, aesthetic distance primarily affects the depth of the TL readers' comprehension.

This part employs specific examples of Song Ci containing color terms to demonstrate how Xu addresses horizon of expectation, deals with indeterminacy of the text, and achieves the most suitable aesthetic distance.

4.1 Horizon of Expectation in Color Term Translation

Horizon of expectation always accompanies the reading process, encompassing the reader's cultural background, preconceived cognitive patterns, and more. Accordingly, the reception and interpretation of artistic works are influenced not only by the reader's existing knowledge and experiences but also by their presuppositions, which may stem from prior reading habits, cultural background, or social environment. As a significant part of traditional Chinese culture, Song Ci presents a particular challenge to English readers. The use of various color terms in these poems adds to the complexity of their interpretation, leading to diverse understandings among different readers. Some color terms retain their classical connotations while others are still in use today. Furthermore, in foreign languages, some color terms carry culturally specific meanings that lack direct equivalents in Western cultures. These factors make comprehension particularly challenging for English readers. In the context of translation, translators' translation methods reflect their horizons of expectation. The quality of the translator's work is responsible for both the text and the readers. One crucial factor that attracts readers to literary works is the extent to which the work can meet or exceed the reader's horizons of expectation. Translators need to find a balance during the creative process—meeting readers' expectations to some extent while breaking these expectations at appropriate moments to offer new perspectives and experiences. The delicate balance between innovation and tradition is one of the main sources of an artwork's charm. Xu addresses readers' horizons of expectation from two aspects: he has the option to closely align the translation with the readers' comprehension for easier reading or to retain color terms that fall outside their horizons of expectation, thereby broadening their understanding and enhancing their ability to tackle similar texts in the future.

4.1.1 Concretizing Horizon of Expectation

As a kind of reader-centered paradigm of literary research, Reception Aesthetics studies the reception effects of the text, which is a shift of the focus of literary criticism from the relation between the author and the text to the relation between the text and the reader. Based on the enlightenment of the theory on literary translation, the translator—the reader of the source material as well as the author of the translated text—must take the target readers' horizons of expectation into consideration during the process of translation. A work that meets the target readers' expectations to some extent—such as

through the use of familiar and interpretative expressions can attract and maintain their interest. When the target readers find elements in the work that meet their expectations, they feel comfortable and satisfied with understanding the meaning and emotion of the source text, thereby enhancing the literary value of the work.

Example 1

ST: 金凤响双槽，弹出今古幽思谁省。（《剪牡丹·舟中闻双琵琶》张先）

TT: The golden phoenix on the pipa sings with ease. Who knows if the woe old or new is played? (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 13).

In this context, “金凤” refers to the pipa, a traditional Chinese musical instrument. By literally translating “金凤” as “golden phoenix,” using this beautiful imagery to represent the pipa, the original beauty of the poem is preserved. And Xu subsequently adds “on the pipa” to clarify its meaning. Here Xu’s rendition serves a dual purpose: it conveys that the “golden phoenix” can symbolize the pipa in Chinese culture, and it also enriches the original text’s specificity. In Western tradition, the phoenix is a mythical bird that symbolizes regeneration and rebirth. It is said to cyclically regenerate or be reborn, rising from its own ashes after dying. Though the phoenix exists in Western mythology, the specific cultural contexts and details may vary. Besides, although the “golden phoenix” is a traditional Chinese lute, that does not have a counterpart in Western musical tradition, the lute family, to which the pipa belongs, includes several Western instruments such as the lute, guitar, and mandolin. If the translator did not specify “golden phoenix,” Western readers, who are unlikely to associate a phoenix with a musical instrument, might be confused. Thus, the translator clarifies the term as “pipa” to meet the horizons of expectation of English readers.

Example 2

ST: 青史几番春梦，黄泉多少奇才。（《西江月》朱敦儒）

TT: History consists of dream on dream; Of society there's cream on cream. (Xie & Xu, 2007, pp. 677-678).

In traditional Chinese mythology, when people die, they enter the underworld known as “黄泉”. For Chinese readers, this term fits their horizons of expectation and is easily understood. The original phrase implies that many legendary figures have passed away, with “黄泉” referring to the underworld, the realm of the dead in Chinese culture. However, Western culture lacks this concept; Westerners generally believe that good people go to heaven after death. Thus, translating the culture-specific word as “the underground” might lead to misunderstandings. Fully considering the cultural background of TL readers, Xu skillfully employed the “rewriting” translation method, changing “黄泉” to “society.” This approach ensures the translation is both accessible and faithful to the original poem’s meaning without causing misinterpretation.

4.1.2 Expanding Horizon of Expectation

In Luo Gaorui's study, when a work meets readers' expectations, it may bring a certain level of satisfaction, but it often lacks depth and innovation, failing to fully stimulate readers' thoughts and emotional resonance (Luo, 2024). If translators can retain some cultural characteristics of poetry while ensuring that readers can understand it as much as possible, they can provide readers with a challenge. This approach not only leaves a lasting impression but also broadens the readers' horizons of expectation, which means acquiring more knowledge and laying a foundation for reading more relevant materials.

Example 3

ST: 雪浪翻空, 粉裳缟夜, 不成春意。(《水龙吟·梨花》周邦彦)

TT: In the air surge the waves snow-white, Silken dress brightens the night. Unequaled by other vernal flowers in tears. (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 132).

If “粉” were literally translated as “pink,” the linguistic correspondence would be straightforward for the translator, and TL readers could quickly grasp the basic color reference of the pear blossoms. However, the translator chose to rewrite the term. Instead of dealing with “粉” as “pink,” the focus was shifted to describe the texture as “silken,” a clever transformation that allows the target readers to visualize the fresh, soft luster of the pear blossoms depicted. This provides the target audience with more difficulty in understanding by breaking the convention of describing flowers by their color and instead highlighting the texture of the blossoms. By doing so, the artistry of the poetry, as well as the translator's creative and artistic translation methods are embodied.

Example 4

ST: 素月分辉, 明河共影, 表里俱澄澈。(《念奴娇·过洞庭》张孝祥)

TT: The skies with pure moonbeams o'erflow; The water surface paved with moonshine: Brightness above, brightness below. (Xie & Xu, 2007, pp. 743-744).

“素” means white. For foreigners, moonbeams can be easily described as “white.” However, the translator rendered it as “pure,” a choice that might initially challenge some audiences' perceptions. In fact, “pure” accurately conveys the original poet's intended sentiment, focusing more on the original poem than white. In China, ancient people believed the moon to be spotless, with moonlight as pure and clear as water. The moonbeams were seen as gentle, neither proud nor restless, symbolizing the noble virtues and high ideals of great people. The moon and moonbeams were often used as a metaphor for personal virtue. The poet, having been demoted and watching the moon by the lake, saw the shining moon and thought of his integrity and righteousness. Therefore, the connotation of “pure” requires the target audience to think beyond their initial expectations of “white,” encouraging them to consider the deeper meaning after an initial moment of confusion.

4.2 Indeterminacy of the Text in Color Term Translation

Zhu (2006) points out that translation fundamentally serves as an act of interpretation, influenced by numerous factors, including indeterminacy of the text. In Reception Aesthetics, a text exists as a literary work in a state yet to be actualized by the reader; its meaning emerges only through the

interaction between the text and the reader, thus remaining inherently indefinite. This indeterminacy of the text inevitably imbues translation with an interpretative nature, allowing translators to fully utilize their imagination. Consequently, different translators can offer various interpretations of the same source text from distinct perspectives, leading to the production of diverse target texts.

Moreover, the literary nature and higher degree of indeterminacy of the text in genres such as Song Ci make it even more challenging for readers to ascertain definitive meanings. Song Ci has long been known for its unique artistic conception—blending sentiments and scenery, transcending mere imagery, and refining rhyme—which potentially distances the translation further from the author’s intent and increases the translator’s involvement and interpretative freedom. Hence, it is the text’s openness and indeterminacy that fundamentally turn translation into an interpretative endeavor. Indeterminacy acts as a catalyst, providing translators with ample space to exercise their imagination and interpret texts from various angles, thereby producing different translations. As a result, the translator can fill in certain gaps, offering readers a clearer understanding of the text, or choose to preserve ambiguities to engage the audience’s imagination.

4.2.1 Reducing Indeterminacy of the Text

As a text is not a fixed entity but an open and dynamic system, Song Ci, with rich imagery, meaning, and emotion enhanced by the use of color terms, can be appreciated. Readers, critics, and scholars can interpret and discuss it diversely in different times, places, and cultural contexts. In the translation process, the translator can strive to eliminate obstacles of indeterminacy. They can work to clarify these ambiguous concepts, making the text easier to understand and more accessible to readers.

Example 5

ST: 危亭望极，草色天涯，叹鬢侵半苎。（《莺啼序·春晚感怀》吴文英）

TT: I look afar from tower high: An endless green spreads far and nigh. Over my hair half grey I sigh. (Xie & Xu, 2007, pp. 708-709).

This passage describes ascending a tall pavilion and gazing into the distance, where a continuous expanse of lush grass stretches to the horizon, sighing over one’s hair that has turned as white as ramie. The translation adopts “green” to denote the vast expanse of grass. The endless expanse of green represents the vitality and vigor of spring and symbolizes youthful years. However, the author’s hair has turned as white as ramie, creating a contrast between the two. Xu, with a deep understanding of Chinese, comprehends the poem profoundly. By translating the color of the grass as “green,” the translation establishes a contrast between “green” and “gray,” revealing the author’s hidden regret over the passage of time and the loss of youth. Instead, if only “grass” or “the color of grass” were translated, there would be a gap in meaning and emotion, failing to accurately convey the text’s exact message to the target readers.

Example 6

ST: 白鸟明边帆影直，隔江闻夜笛。（《闻鹊喜·吴山观涛》周密）

TT: Far away white birds mingle with sails white, Beyond the stream we hear a flute at night. (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 87).

“白鸟” refers to white aquatic birds. “明边” highlights the shining hue of the birds. While the poem does not explicitly mention the color of “帆”, the translation specifies the color “white,” enhancing the sentence’s symmetry and fluency. The original poem describes a splendid evening scene: the previous line depicts the sunset glow as if it has just been woven on a loom, showcasing its brilliance, while this line illustrates boats sailing and birds flying at dusk, with the shadows of birds and sails complementing each other, creating a striking color contrast. The addition of “white” precisely captures the scene where the white birds and white sails blend seamlessly on the water, concretizing the author’s intended expression and allowing the TL readers to experience vivid and magnificent imagery directly.

4.2.2 Maintaining Indeterminacy of the Text

The essence of a viewer’s appreciation of an artwork lies in using experience and imagination to fill in the blanks and ambiguities within the work, discovering, developing, and realizing its potential elements. This is the basic meaning of “concretization” in dealing with indeterminacies. Zhu Liyuan (2004) argues, since the ambiguities and blanks in a work present themselves in multiple ways, they provide numerous potential possibilities for readers’ “concretization.” Therefore, readers, as viewers, have the right to extract more information from indeterminacy of the text. In this context, the translator needs to retain a certain degree of indeterminacy to spark the readers’ interest and stimulate their understanding of the uncertainties evoked by the color terms in Song Ci.

Example 7

ST: 粉墙低，梅花照眼，依然旧风味。（《花犯·梅花》周邦彦）

TT: Over low rosy wall appear The mume flowers, dazzling the eyes Still as last year. (Xie & Xu, 2007, pp. 128-129).

The term “粉墙” is not rendered as “pink wall” but as “rosy wall” in the translation. When TL readers encounter this rendition and compare the bilingual versions, they may feel curious about why the wall is described as “rosy” rather than “pink”—a color directly corresponding to “粉” in the source text. This translation choice is justified by the contextual setting: the wall takes on a rosy hue under the reflection of the blooming rosy plum blossoms. Using “rosy” is more appropriate here, as it accentuates the vivid brilliance of the fully bloomed plum blossoms. In essence, “pink” and “rosy” carry distinct connotations: “pink” refers to a color that lies between red and white, whereas “rosy” denotes a shade of reddish pink with a warmer, more luminous tone. Such a subtle discrepancy in color terminology may spark TL readers’ interest, prompting them to delve deeper into the scene described in the source text and reflect on the nuanced implications behind the color choice.

Example 8

ST: 多情易老，青鸾何处，书成难寄。（《水龙吟·采药径》葛长庚）

TT: Lovers are easy to grow old. Have they heard Where is the blue bird To bring to them a word? (Xie & Xu, 2007, pp. 307-308).

When “青” is used to describe certain objects, animals, or within specific cultural contexts, it often denotes a color between blue and green, or even tends to indicate blue. For instance, “青鸾”, a bird associated with message delivery, is translated as “blue bird” rather than “green bird.” This is because “青鸾” with specific cultural connotations in ancient Chinese literature and mythology, is usually linked with auspiciousness, nobility, or symbolic significance. In these cultural contexts, “青” tends to be understood as a shade of blue akin to the sky or the ocean, underscoring its mystical or noble symbolic meaning. However, such a translation still retains indeterminacy because this animal is a mythical bird similar to the phoenix, and its actual existence is uncertain, meaning its color is ultimately indeterminate. The translator chose to render its color as blue. English readers might question whether a bird capable of delivering messages truly exists, leaving them with much room for deliberation.

4.3 Aesthetic Distance in Color Term Translation

Aesthetic distance primarily determines the artistic value of literary works. An appropriate aesthetic distance can help readers maintain a certain level of objectivity, allowing them to appreciate and evaluate the artwork from a more neutral perspective (Jauss, 1982). Aesthetic distance is closely related to the ease of understanding; too great or too small a distance can affect the depth and impact of the artistic experience. For Song Ci, which has high artistic value but is relatively difficult to understand, translators should pay special attention to the distance between the text and the reader. They need to preserve the original text’s characteristics while considering the ease of the reader’s comprehension. This balance ensures that the translation is both accessible and fluent for the reader, while also broadening their horizons and providing a new aesthetic experience. The translator’s attempts to narrow or maintain the aesthetic gap contribute to the realization of the work’s aesthetic value.

4.3.1 Narrowing Aesthetic Distance

Reception Aesthetics emphasizes the reader’s participation and acceptance during the text understanding, by shifting the central position of studies from the author and work to the reader. It claims that only the works that have been comprehended and delivered by readers possess artistic value and meaning. To achieve a similar aesthetic distance between the original text and its readers, and the target text and its readers, the translator needs to balance a suitable aesthetic distance. This allows readers to grasp the text’s essence, ensuring that the target text has almost the same impact on the TL readers as the original text does on its readers.

Song Ci is concise yet rich in meaning and imagery, but from the TL readers’ perspective, this characteristic can cause interruptions in understanding, further deepening the assumed distance between the TL readers and the target text, thus hindering reading and appreciation. For this reason, the translator must adopt reasonable translation to narrow the aesthetic distance and provide English readers with an authentic experience of the original poem.

Example 9

ST: 有桃花红, 李花白, 菜花黄。(《行香子》秦观)

TT: Peach red, plums mellow And rape flowers yellow. (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 596).

This sentence is an antithesis with three parallel short phrases depicting a spring scene. Xu translated “白” as “mellow,” which seems somewhat jarring, because from a translation method perspective, “红” (red) and “黄” (yellow) are translated literally, while “白” (white) is rewritten instead of translated as “white.” However, this translation creates a rhyme, which narrows the distance between the target audience and the poetry. Both Chinese and Western poetry emphasize rhyme, with Shakespeare’s sonnets being the most famous in Western poetry. His plays and sonnets are beloved worldwide and are part of the world’s cultural heritage. The cleverness of this translation lies in the fact that, although the original poem uses a parallel structure without rhyme, the translator rewrote it to create a rhyme between “mellow” and “yellow,” expressing the rhythmic beauty of English poetry and thus aligning with the TL readers’ aesthetic standards for poetry. This translation enhances the cadence of the poem, making it more melodious and helping the TL readers appreciate the rhythmic beauty of the poetry.

Example 10

ST: 若问闲情都几许？一川烟草，满城风絮，梅子黄时雨。（《青玉案》贺铸）

TT: If you ask me how deep and wide I am lovesick, Just see a misty plain where grass grows thick, A townful of willow down wafting on the breeze, Or drizzling rain yellowing all mume-trees! (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 366).

These lines express the poet’s many sorrows, comparing them to the abundant wild grass on the ground, the drifting willow catkins of spring, and the continuous light rain of the plum rain season. Here, “黄” is originally an adjective describing a season—the time when plums ripen, known as the plum rain season in China. The translator creatively turned this adjective into the verb “yellowing.” In classical poetry, adjectives are often used as verbs, which convey action while preserving the descriptive nature of the adjective. This dual function enhances the vividness and artistic effect. In this case, the translation by turning the adjective “黄” into the verb “yellowing” imparts dynamic beauty to the continuous plum rain. Just as the endless wild grass and the countless drifting willow catkins mentioned earlier, the ceaseless plum rain also conveys an unending quality. These three metaphorical comparisons vividly portray the poet’s deep and numerous sorrows, providing a profound and diverse aesthetic experience for the audience.

4.3.2 Keeping Aesthetic Distance

Reading interest is an indispensable part of the reading process and one of the most important factors in achieving the aesthetic effect of literary translation. It is necessary to keep enough aesthetic distance and to give full play to the translator’s aesthetic creativity when translating Chinese classical poetry. If the aesthetic distance between readers and the text is too close, making it too easy to understand and effortless to read, without any novel reading experiences, readers are likely to become bored. This is why sometimes the range of aesthetic distance should be expanded to enable them to explore the beauty of the work and gain new experiences.

In translation, aesthetic distance sometimes requires extending to some extent. When the translation

includes expressions that are relatively unfamiliar to the readers, they tend to exhibit greater curiosity. This appropriately expanded aesthetic distance can guide them to achieve the ultimate goal of reading—a comprehensive understanding of the text. Therefore, translators sometimes adopt translations that widen the aesthetic distance, employing some of the original text's linguistic and cultural features to stimulate the readers' appreciation of the cultural connotations.

Example 11

ST: 葡萄过雨新痕，正拍拍轻鸥，翩翩小燕。（《南浦·春水》王沂孙）

TT: On grape-hued water you'll find new traces of rain, The gulls flap their wings light With young swallows in flight. (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 89).

In the original verse, “葡萄” refers to the green color of grape wine, often used by ancient Chinese poets to describe the emerald green of river water. Given that it refers to green water, it could be translated as “emerald green river water” or “jade-green river water.” Both translations convey the color of the river water. However, the translation directly translates “葡萄” as “grape-hued water”, indicating that the color of grapes is used to represent the color of the river in the poetry. While this expression is quite common in classical Chinese poetry and does not present much of an aesthetic distance for Chinese readers, it is more subtle for English readers. The translator's choice to use this translation preserves the original text's characteristics and widens the aesthetic distance between the TL readers and the text. Although this increases the reading difficulty, it stimulates and guides the TL readers' understanding, offering them an aesthetic experience different from their own culture and expressions.

Example 12

ST: 思君忆君，魂牵梦萦。翠销香减云屏，更那堪酒醒！（《醉太平·闺情》刘过）

TT: I think of you, I long for you, unseen Even in my dream, O beloved of mine! When incense warms the mica screen, What can I do when I'm awake from wine? (Xie & Xu, 2007, p. 395).

“翠销” refers to the fading green hue on a woman's beautifully arched eyebrows upon awakening, indicating that some time has passed while she sobered up, as the incense has almost completely burned away. However, the translator employed omission in the translation. For English readers who understand some Chinese and can compare the Chinese and English versions, this translation might be confusing, making them wonder where “翠销” went and what it means, prompting them to think about how to interpret it. This added reflection can help readers achieve a deeper understanding of the text. Although the translation process increases the aesthetic distance, the poem's aesthetic value is realized through the readers' efforts to comprehend the original poetry. Once they grasp the connotation by digging into the meaning of “翠销”, readers can gain a unique aesthetic experience and enhance the depth of readers' comprehension.

In conclusion, this part primarily explores the applicability of Reception Aesthetics, focusing on horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance in the translation of color terms in Song Ci. Through in-depth analysis, the following conclusions are drawn. According to

Reception Aesthetics, the translator takes on the task of interpreting the original text, devising translation to fill in or retain indeterminacies, and considering an appropriate aesthetic distance. First of all, Xu's rendition takes into account the cultural and aesthetic expectations of the TL readers. By understanding their horizons of expectation, he ensures that his translations remain faithful to the original text while also being accessible and appealing to new audiences, preserving the beauty and emotional depth of the poems. Additionally, considering that Song Ci often uses symbolic language and imagery to create multiple layers of meaning, Xu strives to deal with indeterminacy of the text, allowing the TL readers to engage with the text and form their interpretations. This approach preserves the poetic essence and invites them to explore the richness of the original work. Finally, he balances aesthetic distance by preserving the artistic qualities of the original poems while making necessary adaptations to enhance readability. This involves careful consideration of language, imagery, and cultural references to ensure the translated poetry is both captivating and faithful to the original's artistic impact. Reception Aesthetics that takes target readers' reception as a goal provides a new perspective for color term rendition, in which three aspects collectively achieve a reader-centered goal, promoting the target readers' engagement and understanding, as well as maximizing the literary value of the translation of color terms in Song Ci.

5. Conclusion

The color terms in Song Ci are complex and varied, containing rich cultural and emotional connotations, which present significant challenges for translation. Through the analysis of Xu's English versions of color terms in Song Ci, this study finds that the core concepts of Reception Aesthetics—horizon of expectation, indeterminacy of the text, and aesthetic distance—provide significant guidance for translation. These core concepts help translators preserve the aesthetic characteristics of the original text while considering the TL readers' understanding and reception, allowing the translations to better convey the original work's emotions and imagery.

As a translator, Xu not only successfully applies the theory of Reception Aesthetics in his translations but also enhances the international dissemination of Song Ci through his unique renditions. For one thing, Xu makes necessary adjustments to preserve the cultural connotations of color terms to cater to the target readers' horizons of expectation. He carefully considers their cultural backgrounds and reading habits, ensuring that the translations are both engaging for them and faithful to the original texts. Apart from that, he deliberates on whether to retain the indeterminacy of the text inherent in the symbolic language and imagery of the poetry. This approach allows the TL readers to interact with the text and form their interpretations, thereby preserving the poetic essence and encouraging the exploration of the original work's rich meanings. Finally, Xu's rendition thoroughly evaluates the cultural and aesthetic standards of English readers. By balancing the aesthetic distance through appropriate translation techniques, he successfully preserves the beauty and emotional depth of source texts. In conclusion, his translations remain linguistically faithful to the original text while employing

artistic recreation, enabling TL readers to resonate with and appreciate the aesthetic value of Song Ci. Additionally, this study reveals that while Reception Aesthetics has been widely discussed both domestically and internationally, its application to the translation of Song Ci, especially its color terms, has been relatively unexplored. By examining the color term translation in Song Ci through the lens of Reception Aesthetics, this study fills this research gap to some extent, providing new insights and methods for future translation studies.

To conclude, the application of Reception Aesthetics to color term translation holds significant importance and promising prospects. However, due to the constraints of time and resources, this study has certain limitations and leaves ample room for more in-depth research on the translation of color terms in ancient poetry. The forms of color terms should be categorized more specifically, and a broader range of translators and their works should be examined and compared. Future research can further explore the rendition of other classical poetry, particularly how to achieve better aesthetic transmission and cultural exchange across different cultural contexts. It is hoped that more scholars will focus on this field in the future, further advancing the international dissemination and study of Song Ci and other Chinese classical poetry.

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