

## Original Paper

# An Inquiry into the English Translation of Chinese Children's Literature from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics: A Case Study of *Bronze and Sunflower*

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to analyze the aesthetic issues in children's literature translation from the perspective of reception aesthetics. First, an overview of the main content of *Bronze and Sunflower*. Next, the article outlines the present situation of international dissemination of Chinese children's literature, highlighting the existing circumstances and known challenges. Taking the English translation of *Bronze and Sunflower* as a case study, the analysis illustrates its manifestation under the lens of reception aesthetics. Furthermore, the study investigates distinctive discourse elements within *Bronze and Sunflower*, including forms of address, regional dialects, and children's songs, to reveal their significance in the literary work. Through this exploration, it finds that the indispensability of aesthetics in children's literature translation, grasping the commonalities between aesthetics and children's literature translation, utilizing and developing them appropriately will be an essential process in the translation of children's literature. It can promote better dissemination and understanding of Chinese children's literature on the international stage, providing deeper insights and methods for children's literature translation.*

### **Keywords**

*Reception aesthetics, bronze and flower, Chinese children's literature, translation*

## **1. Introduction**

*Bronze and Sunflower* is a classic work in children's literature that leads readers to go back to the rural landscapes of China in the 20th century, unfolding an affectionate tableau of life. The narrative centers around the friendship between Bronze, a rustic village boy, and Sunflower, a girl from the city, as they navigate the challenges of childhood amidst the vast fields of wheat, their experiences encapsulating

innocence and resilience. Set against the backdrop of the Jiangnan water towns, imbued with local vernacular and idiomatic expressions, *Bronze and Sunflower* embodies the cultural authenticity of Chinese children's literature, crafting a distinctive cultural landscape and spiritual portrait. These elements collectively constitute the unique charm and appeal of Chinese children's literature. However, upon critical examination of its English translation, there remains room for improvement, particularly concerning the rendering of region-specific vernacular language. The book vividly portrays the simple yet profound way of life of rural inhabitants during the 1960s, highlighting their indomitable spirit in the face of adversity, thus painting a poignant picture of rural China characterized by fortitude and hope.

In 2015, *Bronze and Sunflower* was meticulously translated by sinologist Helen Wang, successfully bridging the linguistic between Chinese and English. The English rendition of *Bronze and Sunflower* not only garnered enthusiastic acclaim and commendable sales figures abroad but also captivated a multitude of young readers internationally, serving as a cultural conduit between East and West. Through this classic piece of children's literature, young readers across the globe gained insight into the singular allure of Chinese children's literature and its rich tapestry of rural cultural heritage. Of particular note is that the author, Cao Wenxuan, was bestowed with the Hans Christian Andersen Prize in 2016 for his outstanding contribution to literature, an accolade that not only underscored his personal literary achievements but also significantly bolstered the international dissemination and appreciation of Chinese culture. As such, *Bronze and Sunflower* transcends being merely a literary masterpiece; it stands as a beacon of China's soft power on the global stage.

In the process of translation, the rich local flavor and cultural depth of these vernacular expressions have been somewhat diluted in an effort to cater to the comprehension level of foreign juvenile readers. This simplification or generalization inadvertently dilutes the distinctiveness of Chinese culture within the translation, potentially robbing overseas readers of the opportunity to fully grasp the essence of the original work and appreciate the nuanced differences of Chinese rural culture. Consequently, the precise and faithful transmission of the cultural nuances embedded in these vernacular expressions emerges as a pivotal challenge in enhancing the international outreach of Chinese children's literature.

## **2. International Dissemination of Chinese Children's Literature: The Current State and Challenges**

Presently, the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature is a topic that warrants closer scrutiny, particularly given the genre's peripheral status within translation studies, especially when focusing on English-speaking countries (Dong, 2017). The creation and translation of children's literature necessitates an understanding of the unique demands and characteristics of the readers. The stands out of children's literature due to its tailored language style and narrative approach, designed with the child audience in mind. Because of the marked differences between children and adults in terms of language comprehension, cognitive levels, socio-psychological aspects, and aesthetic

standards, both authors and translators must deeply comprehend these distinctions and formulate effective translation strategies for accurate and engaging text transformation. To resonate with the worldview of children, the language should be straightforward and lively, plots imaginatively conceived, while balancing educational value with entertainment, ensuring works captivate young minds and foster their intellectual development. In translation, preserving the spirit of the original while adjusting expression to suit children's linguistic habits and cognitive capabilities is essential for a seamless cross-cultural reading experience (Yu, 2019).

Chinese children's literature has garnered some advancements in terms of international dissemination. On the one hand, the Chinese government proactively advances the global outreach of children's literature by means of diverse avenues including exhibitions, literary exchange programs, and the translation of publications, thereby facilitating the projection of distinguished Chinese children's literature onto the international arena. On the other hand, as China's economic and cultural clout grows, foreign publishers and readers are demonstrating a rising interest in Chinese children's literature. *Bronze and Sunflower* is a good example to show that Chinese children's literature can reach international audiences. The Maltese translation of *Wild Mallow Hill* (*Ghajn Tuffieha*), though not a direct English translation but still a work by a Chinese author, illustrates the translation of Chinese children's literature into smaller languages, advancing its global outreach. Professor Fang Weiping's *Four Decades of Chinese Children's Literature*, a bilingual Chinese-English publication, comprehensively reviews the evolution of Chinese children's literature from 1978 to 2018.

Contrastingly, the introduction of foreign children's literature to China began around the May Fourth Movement period, with a wealth of classics such as *Andersen's fairy tales*, *La Fontaine's fables*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* being translated and introduced to Chinese audiences. This wave of translation covered a broad geographical spectrum, from European countries, exposing Chinese young readers to diverse cultural perspectives. Through these introductions, China's literary scene presented a more colorful and internationalized world of children's literature, profoundly impacting subsequent creative endeavors and educational philosophies.

Therefore, the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature also faces the challenges. China boasts a vast readership of nearly 300 million children, yet the quality of children's literature translations they encounter is less than satisfactory (Yuan, 2009). A critical factor lies in the lack of attention and research from domestic literary critics and translation theorists towards children's literature translation. As a distinct genre, children's literature possesses a unique set of criteria in material selection, thematic depth, narrative structure, language use, and rhetorical techniques, diverging from adult literature. Moreover, the translation of children's literature transcends literal conversion. It demands that the translator possess a profound understanding of Chinese culture and fluency in the target language, capable of bridging cultural gaps while accurately capturing the essence of the original. The genre's inherent qualities—its innocence, simplicity, and didactic entertainment—add layers of complexity to the translation process. Translators must present complex

concepts in a manner accessible to children, a task more challenging than translating for adults, as it requires maintaining the original's charm while ensuring content is both entertaining and educational. Successful children's literature translation is not merely linguistic transformation but cultural exchange and recreation, testing the translator's bilingual capabilities, intercultural communication skills, and deep understanding of children's psychology and reading preferences. It serves as a bridge for intercultural understanding, allowing children worldwide to share in humanity's common cultural heritage.

### 3. Case Analysis: Reception Aesthetics for the English Translation of *Bronze and Sunflower*

#### 3.1 The Translation of Vocative

In a cultural definition, vocatives are not merely confined to a grammatical construct within linguistics; rather, they are profoundly rooted in societal customs, cultural identities, and the fabric of interpersonal relationships. Each culture wields its own unique set of guidelines for choosing and employing vocatives, which mirror the prevailing codes of etiquette, respect hierarchies, degrees of familiarity, and the underlying social architecture. These linguistic markers thus become vehicles for conveying complex social signals and cultural values, illustrating the intricate interplay between language and society across diverse cultural landscapes.

ST: 她见了青铜, 轻声唱起奶奶教给她的歌...

TT: As soon as she saw him, she started to sing one of the songs Nainai had taught her...

In this instance, the vocative “奶奶” (Nainai), which refers to one's grandmother, is rendered phonetically as "Nainai" in the English translation of *Bronze and Sunflower* instead of being translated as "grandmother." As a pivotal character embodying the archetype of a hardworking and benevolent rural woman, “奶奶” transcends a mere generational title—it symbolizes a rich cultural and emotional connotation that is central to the narrative.

The translator's decision to retain “奶奶” as “Nainai” through transliteration is grounded in preserving the local color and authenticity of the vocative, thereby immersing young readers in the original cultural milieu of the story. This strategy aligns with the principles of Reception Aesthetics, a theory that emphasizes the active role of the reader in the interpretation and appreciation of a literary work.

Reception Aesthetics posits that meaning is not solely determined by the author or the text itself but emerges through the dynamic interaction between the text and its readers. In the context of translated literature, the translator becomes a mediator who must consider how different audiences will receive and interpret the work. By keeping “奶奶” as “Nainai,” the translator allows English-speaking readers to encounter the vocative in its original form, potentially evoking curiosity about its cultural significance and prompting them to engage more deeply with the text.

ST: 奶奶摸摸身边葵花的头, 笑着说: “我是唱给我们葵花听的。”

TT: Nainai would stroke her granddaughter's head, smile, and say, "This is for our Sunflower."

The names bestowed upon individuals in Chinese culture are often imbued with profound meanings,

encapsulating the aspirations and hopes of parents for their offspring. In the context of *Bronze and Sunflower*, the protagonists' names, "青铜" (qing tong) and "葵花" (kui hua), were not subjected to phonetic transliteration but instead of using the domestication—a method that aims to make foreign material more accessible and familiar to the target audience.

This choice is particularly significant when considered through the lens of Reception Aesthetics, a theoretical framework that highlights the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning and the aesthetic experience of a text. According to Reception Aesthetics, the translation and reception of a work are not static processes but dynamic ones that are influenced by the cultural background, expectations, and interpretive strategies of the reader.

The decision to translate "青铜" and "葵花" as "Bronze" and "Sunflower" demonstrates a thoughtful consideration of the target audience's reception and interpretive capabilities, making the text more relatable and comprehensible while preserving the depth and cultural resonance of the original work. This approach to translation underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the reader's role in the construction of meaning and the aesthetic appreciation of literature across cultures.

### 3.2 The Translation of Dialect

Dialects, as essential components of specific community cultures, profoundly reflect the worldview, values, and accumulated wisdom of these groups. They are indispensable in the construction of ethnic identity. Language, akin to a river of culture, absorbs and transmits the multifaceted cultural knowledge and wisdom sedimented over the long course of a community's history. It serves as a bridge connecting past and future, facilitating communication between the individual and the collective.

ST: 拿到棍子后, 他用棍子轻轻敲打着青铜的脑门: “臭哑巴, 你给我放老实点! 如果不听老子的话, 老子要把你和那个小孩一起扔到大河里去!”

TT: He tapped it very lightly on Bronze's forehead. “You need to show me some respect, mute! Otherwise, I'm gonna hurl you and that kid into the river.”

In the Chinese language, the multifaceted meanings of the term "老子" and its usage in various contexts, especially its coarse connotations in dialects, reflect the rich layers of expression in Chinese and the profound influence of cultural background on linguistic use. When "老子" is employed as an insult or provocation, it not only conveys the speaker's arrogance and contempt for the other party but also carries regional emotional hues and cultural identity. In literary works, this usage can vividly outline character traits such as rudeness, lack of upbringing, or a rustic quality, making the character portrayal more vivid and three-dimensional.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the process of translating and interpreting texts is the result of interaction between the author, text, and reader. Reception aesthetics emphasizes the subjectivity and creative role of the reader in the reading process, positing that the meaning of a text is not fixed but rather changes with the interpretations of different readers. Thus, when faced with strongly localized or potentially offensive vocabulary, the translator's choices will directly impact the reception experience of readers in the target language.

For young readers, directly translating or retaining crude language from the original may not meet age-appropriateness standards for their reading material; hence, translators opt to omit or substitute terms like "老子" out of consideration for protecting younger readers. However, such handling may lead to the loss of certain cultural nuances and emotional intensity of the original, affecting the reader's comprehensive understanding of the style and deeper meanings of the text. From an aesthetic viewpoint, this may dilute the local color and the distinctiveness of character portrayals, reducing the authenticity and richness of the reading experience.

ST: 他叫喊到: “熊样, 把腰杆挺直了!”

TT: “We must be as strong as bears!” he shouted. “Straighten those backs!”

The term “熊样” in this context refers to the disheveled, lethargic state of the villagers who, having suffered from a locust plague, are depicted as listless and dispirited. The village headman uses this term, which carries an insulting connotation, to address his fellow villagers, revealing his frustration yet concern for their apathy. What appears to be scolding and rebuke is actually an expression of care and anxiety, subtly indicating the close-knit and unobstructed relationship between the village headman and the villagers.

In the translated version, however, this phrase is rendered as "as strong as bears," transforming a term of disparagement into one of encouragement. This change not only alters the meaning but also shifts the tone from one of negative censure to positive inspiration. Such a transformation represents a significant departure from the original in both sense and style.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the translation process and subsequent interpretation by the reader are interactive processes influenced by the triad of author, text, and reader. Reception aesthetics highlights the active and interpretive role of the reader, suggesting that the meaning of a text is not predetermined but emerges through the reader's engagement with the text. This theory posits that the meaning of a work is fluid and evolves with each reader's unique understanding, influenced by personal experiences, cultural background, and expectations.

### 3.3 *The Translation of Folk Songs*

Childhood rhymes stand as enduring artifacts of China's rural development, reflecting the diverse cultural tapestries woven across its expansive geography. Each region's rhymes carry the echoes of its own folkloric heritage, encapsulating the singular cultural identities that define them. The rhymes featured, with their roots firmly planted in the southern countryside, mirror the customs and traditions that are hallmarks of Chinese rural life, replete with symbolic motifs that are emblematic of the broader Chinese cultural ethos.

ST: 树头挂网枉求虾,  
泥里无金空拨沙。  
刺槐树里栽狗橘,  
几时开得牡丹花?

TT: Fishing for prawns in trees? Oh, put away your net!

Looking for gold in mud? There's only sand as yet!

Oranges grow on the black locust tree,

Oh, when will we see the peony?

Reception Aesthetics posits that the meaning of a text is not unilaterally determined by the author but is co-created through the dynamic interaction between the text and its readers. The English rendition of this Chinese rhyme has been meticulously crafted to maintain its rhythmical integrity and oral quality in an English-speaking context. The translator's deliberate construction of end rhymes, internal rhymes, and carefully calibrated meter ensures that English-speaking audiences can experience a similar auditory and emotional resonance as the original Chinese listeners. By preserving the humorous and satirical elements through rhetorical questions and exclamatory interjections, the translator successfully conveys the spirit of the original rhyme, facilitating a shared sense of humor and critical reflection across linguistic barriers.

In summation, viewing this translation through the lens of Reception Aesthetics reveals it as more than a mere linguistic transposition; rather, it is a creative endeavor where the translator serves as a mediator, conveying the essence and artistic appeal of the original to English readers while encouraging them to engage in personalized interpretations informed by their own cultural backgrounds and experiential knowledge. This interactive and co-creative process, central to Reception Aesthetics, underscores the dynamic nature of literary meaning-making in which both the text and the reader play integral roles.

ST: 南山脚下一缸油,

姑嫂两个赌梳头。

姑娘梳成盘龙髻,

嫂嫂梳成羊兰头。

TT: As soon as she saw him, she started to sing

one of the songs Nainai had taught her:

"Little Sister Meimei, we combed your hair,

And now you look like a lady!

Big sister Jiejie, we combed your hair,

And now you look like a baby! "

In the nursery rhyme, the figures of "girl" (姑娘) and "sister-in-law" (嫂嫂) are presented, which have been respectively translated into "Little Sister Meimei" and "Big sister Jiejie" in the English version. From the perspective of interpersonal relationships and age differences, the treatment in both languages achieves a similar effect. Finding direct equivalents in English for "姑娘" and "嫂嫂" is challenging due to the nuanced connotations these terms carry in Chinese culture. If the translation were to strictly adhere to literal accuracy, the resulting text would become obscure and disrupt the rhyme's rhythm.

The translator has opted for a more flexible approach by rendering the two characters simply as "sister" figures, further enhancing the exotic flavor of the rhyme through the inclusion of the "Jiejie" and "Meimei." This strategy not only maintains the rhyme's flow and readability but also introduces an

element of cultural intrigue for English-speaking readers, encouraging them to explore the cultural background of the terms.

Drawing upon Reception Aesthetics, this translation can be seen as a creative act that facilitates a meaningful encounter between the source text and the target audience. The translator's decisions to adapt the rhyme to English linguistic conventions and cultural expectations allow the English-speaking readers to access and appreciate the rhyme's humor, cultural references, and aesthetic qualities. The inclusion of pinyin serves as a bridge, offering a window into Chinese culture while maintaining the rhyme's poetic structure.

#### 4. Result

The paper starts from the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature lies in the different situations and faces significant challenges, including linguistic barriers and the need for translators to deeply understand both source and target cultures. Additionally, cultural discrepancies present another obstacle, as certain intrinsically Chinese elements might not be readily comprehensible or palatable to foreign readers. Furthermore, the fiercely competitive international marketplace and the robust traditions of children's literature in numerous countries also impose competitive strains on the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature. Through the lens of reception aesthetics, the reader's active role in the construction of meaning becomes apparent. The translation of "Bronze and Sunflower" successfully engages the reader by presenting cultural elements in a way that resonates with their experiences and expectations. This approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the story but also enriches the reader's aesthetic experience. The translation of this novel not only serves as a bridge for intercultural understanding but also enriches the global literary landscape by sharing unique cultural narratives and perspectives.

Consequently, to foster the enhanced diffusion of Chinese children's literature on the international platform, there is a necessity to persistently intensify endeavors in the translation of works, elevate the caliber and efficacy of translations, reinforce international literary exchanges and collaboration, augment comprehension and dialogue among disparate cultures, and engender works endowed with superior international resonance and distinction. It is essential for translators and publishers to continue exploring innovative translation strategies that can effectively communicate the beauty and nuances of Chinese children's literature to international readers.

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