

Original Paper

Study on the English Translation of Novels from Appraisal Theory—Two Translation Versions of *The Story of Kong Yiji*

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Abstract

*Appraisal Theory, as a significant component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), encompasses three dimensions: attitude, graduation, and engagement. This study adopts the attitude subsystem of Appraisal Theory within SFL as its theoretical framework and compares two English translations of Lu Xun's short story *The Story of Kong Yiji* one by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, and the other by Lan Shi ling. The study employs the UAM Corpus Tool, a corpus annotation software, to meticulously tag and statistically analyze the attitudinal resources in the original text and both translations. The analysis reveals that the translation by Yang and Dai generally contains more attitudinal resources than the original text, while Lan's translation contains fewer. Building on these findings, this paper further explores various factors influencing translation differences, including the translators' personal styles, target language cultural backgrounds, and translation strategies, aiming to reveal how these factors affect the reproduction of the original text's attitudinal resources. This study aims to provide new perspectives for translation studies, enrich translation theories, and offer guidance for translation practice. Through in-depth analysis, this paper not only uncovers the complexities of the translation process but also offers new insights into understanding translation as a cross-cultural communication activity.*

Keywords

*Appraisal Theory, Attitude System, *The Story of Kong Yiji*, Comparative Analysis*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the “going global” of Chinese culture has become an important window for China to enhance its international communication capabilities, demonstrate its cultural influence, and promote cultural exchanges and mutual learning. The modern and contemporary Chinese literary works are abundant and diverse, serving not only as an integral part of the development of modern Chinese culture

but also as an important testament to the ideological evolution of modern times. *The Story of Kong Yiji* by the literary master Lu Xun is a milestone in the history of modern Chinese literature. It portrays the distinctive character of Kong Yiji, revealing the spiritual poison of the imperial examination system on intellectuals and the cannibalistic essence of the feudal system, carrying a strong anti-feudal significance. *The Story of Kong Yiji*, as one of Lu Xun's representative works, is also a microcosm of China's "going global" strategy in terms of international dissemination. Through translations into various languages, this work has been introduced to readers worldwide, allowing Lu Xun's profound critique of feudal society and his deep insights into human nature to transcend national borders and influence readers around the globe. Such cultural exchanges not only promote the international spread of literary works but also contribute to the diverse development of world literature.

So far, there have been translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji* by E. H. F. Mills (1930), G. A. Kennedy (1932), and Julia Lovell (2009) published abroad, while domestically there are translations by Yang Xian Yi and Dai Na Die, as well as by Fang Zhi Hua. Current research on the English translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji* can be summarized into three aspects: First, there are studies on the translation theoretical perspectives of *The Story of Kong Yiji*, including ecological translation theory, cross-cultural theory, memetics, appraisal theory, attention window perspective, functional theory, cognitive perspective, etc.; Second, there are comparative translation studies of *The Story of Kong Yiji*, including language evaluation meaning, character description, verb translation, translator style, etc.; Third, there are studies on the content of the English translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji*, including the translation of culture-loaded words, dialects, metaphors, etc.

Appraisal Theory, as a significant achievement in the field of linguistics, has been widely disseminated and has long been integrated into the field of translation studies. Chen Mingyao (2007) established a connection between Appraisal Theory and news discourse, attempting to explore attitudinal resources and proposing translation methods for various resources; Xia Yun and Li Defeng (2009) discussed the translation effect of character images in novels based on Appraisal Theory, concluding that the transformation of evaluative meanings can lead to different effects in the transmission of the protagonist's image, which is not only the result of dialogue and communication between different translators and the implied author but is also constrained by factors such as reader expectations and social ideologies. Fu Lihua (2010) used Appraisal Theory to study the attitudes and their manifestations in business discourse, finding that there are both explicit and implicit manifestations. Chen Mei and Wen Jun (2013) studied the distribution and frequency of evaluative resources in Bai Juyi's narrative poems and their English translations from the perspective of the attitude system of Appraisal Theory. At the same time, Hou Linping and Li Yanni (2013) discussed the issue of translator subjectivity through Appraisal Theory. Subsequently, more and more scholars began to pay attention to combining Appraisal Theory with specific texts, such as Li Chengchen and Jiang Guiying (2017) who started from the attitude system of Appraisal Theory to study the translation of Chinese and English academic monographs. It can be seen that Appraisal Theory has been widely disseminated both domestically and internationally and has

gradually extended to more detailed theoretical branches. However, research on the English translation comparison of *The Story of Kong Yiji* from the perspective of Appraisal Theory is still relatively scarce. In view of this, this study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. First, it uses the UAM Corpus Tool to statistically analyze the attitudinal resources in the two English translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji*, and then conducts qualitative discourse analysis based on Appraisal Theory.

2. Appraisal Theory and Its Application in Translation Studies

Appraisal Theory, proposed by linguist James R. Martin in the 1990s, represents a new development in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It builds upon SFL to focus on interpersonal meaning and has expanded SFL by establishing a theoretical framework for the appraisal system. Appraisal Theory is an extension of interpersonal meaning in SFL, examining the “linguistic resources through which speakers express, negotiate, and naturalize specific inter-subjective relations and ideologies.” The appraisal system is divided into three subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation.

The attitude system occupies a central position in the appraisal system and includes resources for affect, judgement, and appreciation. Affect resources refer to psychological reactions to actions, texts, phenomena, etc., emphasizing psychological emotional states such as anxiety, happiness, eagerness, etc. Judgement resources evaluate the behavior of language users based on ethical and moral standards, making affirmations or negations of human behavior according to institutional norms, including personal and moral judgments, such as “ridiculous” or “meticulous.” Appreciation resources emphasize aesthetic evaluations of the value of things, such as “late autumn” or “sparkling waves.”

The engagement system is a complex framework that includes the subsystems of self and other. The graduation system refers to the increase or decrease in the emotional attitudes of appraisal resources, involving changes in the quantity and intensity of emotional attitudes, and includes two dimensions: force and focus.

3. Research Methodology

To investigate how translators convey emotional attitudes in *The Story of Kong Yiji*, a systematic methodology is employed, combining corpus analysis with Appraisal Theory. This approach allows for a close examination of linguistic choices that express emotion, judgment, and appreciation in the translated texts. By focusing on attitudinal resources, the study aims to reveal how different translations may emphasize or downplay certain emotional tones, reflecting the translators’ interpretive stances. The following research questions are designed to guide this analysis, targeting key aspects of translation differences, emotional effects, and influencing factors. These questions provide a clear framework for data collection and interpretation, ensuring a focused and meaningful comparison between the two translations.

3.1 Research Questions

This study aims to address the following three questions: First, what are the differences in the distribution of attitudinal resources between the two English translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji*? Second, comparing the two translated versions, what kind of emotional attitude effects do the translators intend to convey? Third, what are the main factors influencing the translators' translations?

3.2 Research Corpus

The short story *The Story of Kong Yiji* is rich in emotional layers, including Kong Yiji's own feelings of inferiority, pride, loneliness, and despair, as well as the ridicule, sympathy, and indifference from those around him. These emotions are intertwined, creating the emotional tension of the novel. The research corpus for this study is selected from the translations of *The Story of Kong Yiji* by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, and Julia Lovell, hereinafter referred to as the Yang translation and the Lan translation.

3.3 Research Method

UAM Corpus Tool is a corpus analysis software developed based on the ideas of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a theoretical framework that considers language as a social semiotic used for social interaction and communication. Appraisal Theory, an extension of SFL, focuses on evaluative resources in language, such as attitudes, emotions, and judgments. This paper will use the UAM Corpus Tool to manually annotate the corpus texts, and through software analysis, automatically generate data on the differences in attitudinal resources between the two translations, in order to facilitate research analysis.

4. Comparative Analysis of Attitude Resources in the Original and Translated Versions of *Kong Yiji* under the Evaluation Theory Attitude System

In *Kong Yiji*, the author employs a wealth of literary techniques to depict the personal image of Kong Yiji, and also uses the author's direct statements and the attitudes of those around Kong Yiji to subtly highlight the character's image, containing a multitude of emotional, evaluative, and appreciative resources. The author aims to list and analyze these attitude resources to identify differences between various translations.

The quantitative analysis results from the UAM Corpus Tool show the distribution of attitude resources in the original text of *Kong Yiji* and its two translated versions as follows in the table.

Table 1. Distribution of Attitudinal Resources

| | Emotion | % | Evaluation | % | Appreciation | % | Total |
|------|---------|--------|------------|--------|--------------|--------|-------|
| ST | 19 | 41.3% | 19 | 41.3% | 8 | 17.39% | 46 |
| Y&DT | 25 | 44.64% | 16 | 28.57% | 15 | 27.27% | 56 |
| LT | 18 | 40.91% | 14 | 31.82% | 12 | 26.79% | 44 |

From Table 1, it is evident that in the original text of *Kong Yiji*, there is a higher distribution of emotional and judgment resources, with fewer appreciative resources, as the story focuses on the portrayal of the character's image and the conveyance of differences in attitudes towards the character. Comparing the Yang translation and the Lan translation, it can be observed that the Yang translation has a distribution of resources that exceeds those in the original text, while the Lan translation has a distribution that is less than that of the original text. Therefore, the author specifically selects representative attitude resources for analysis.

4.1 Emotional Resources

Emotional resources primarily involve expressions of feelings towards people or objects, such as anxiety, concern, fear, etc. Generally, emotional resources can be divided into positive and negative emotional evaluations, as well as direct and implicit emotional evaluations.

Table 2. Distribution of Emotional Resources

| | Yang & Dai | Lan |
|----------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 显出极高兴的样子 | lit up √ | euphorically + |
| 单调无聊 | boring and monotonous √ | bored senseless √ |
| 涨红了脸 | flush √ | flush scarlet + |
| 哄笑 | roar with laughter √ | collapse with mirth - |
| 颓唐不安 | dejected, discomfited face √ | 0 |
| 恳切 | earnestly √ | 0 |
| 不耐烦 | exhausted √ | sulkily - |

Based on the distribution of emotional resources in the original text of Lu Xun's *Kong Yiji*, the primary emotional resources are negative emotions. The author's narrative revolves entirely around Kong Yiji, a complex and contradictory character. He is obsessed with reading, lives in poverty, and is constantly despised and ridiculed by others. However, Kong Yiji also has a kind and honest side; he teaches children to read and shares his limited food, such as fennel beans, with them. These details reveal the brilliance of his humanity. Nevertheless, the author mainly uses the depiction of Kong Yiji's tragic fate to expose the social realities, hence the frequent use of negative and pessimistic terms.

Table 3. Comparison of Emotional Resources in the Two Translations

| Emotional Resources | Positive | Negative |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| | 笑, 显出极高兴的样子, | 单调, 无聊, 涨红了脸, 哄笑, 颓唐不安, 恳切, 不耐烦, 极惋惜, |

The emotional expressions in the original text are predominantly negative and pessimistic. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie's translation can essentially achieve a one-to-one correspondence between the original text and the translation, while Lan Shiling's translation focuses more on the coherence of the translation and the choice of vocabulary, neglecting the expressive significance of emotional resources. For example, “哄笑” (roaring with laughter) appears when Kong Yiji speaks in obscure and difficult-to-understand language, and the others in the tavern mock him. Yang's translation as “roar with laughter” clearly contains a sense of ridicule, reflecting the disdain and aversion others feel towards Kong Yiji's actions, with a distinct emotional bias. In contrast, Lan's translation as “collapse with mirth” emphasizes only “mirth,” and with the modifier “collapse,” the meaning is ambiguous. The translator's choice to translate in this way is to make the action more vivid, but such a translation requires the reader to infer the emotional undertones from the context. Additionally, emotional expressions such as “颓唐不安” (dejected and uneasy) and “恳切” (earnest) are not translated in Lan's version. Considering the original text's descriptive phrases as repetitive and redundant, the translator only selects parts that need more emphasis for translation. In the case of “颓唐不安,” the translator only translates “a layer of gray spread over his face” and omits the emotional expression. Regarding “不耐烦” (impatient), which appears in the process of Kong Yiji teaching me to recognize characters, I show a reluctance and impatience. Yang's translation directly translates it as “exhausted,” which fits my mental state, while Lan's translation as “sulkily” conveys only a sense of unhappiness, failing to fully express the impatience.

4.2 Evaluative Resources

Evaluative resources are a series of judgments made about the behavior of people or things based on ethical and moral standards. These include terms like shameful, despicable, beautiful, etc. Evaluative resources can be further divided into social evaluation and social sanction. Social evaluation involves judgments on non-moral aspects, including assessments of character traits, abilities, and physical appearance. Social sanction, on the other hand, involves value assessments on moral grounds.

Table 4. Distribution of Evaluative Resources

| Evaluation Resources |
|--|
| 阔绰、凶脸孔、没有好声气、坏脾气、好吃懒做、唠唠叨叨 夹杂不清、懒懒的、品行好 |

The evaluative resources in “Kong Yiji” are mostly the author's judgments of Kong Yiji's personal image and the judgments of the other people in the tavern around him. The evaluative vocabulary for Kong Yiji is relatively sparse and concentrated on social evaluation. The reason for this is that the author mainly depicts Kong Yiji's image through related action and psychological descriptions, with fewer direct evaluations of the character. In addition, the evaluative vocabulary used for Kong Yiji is essentially

derogatory and negative, which aligns with the author's creative intention: to reveal social realities through the destitute image of Kong Yiji.

Table 5. Comparison of Evaluative Resources in Two Translations

| | Yang & Dai | Lan |
|----------|---------------------------------|---|
| 阔绰 | few of whom can afford this √ | 0 |
| 凶脸孔 | grim-faced man + | had a terrible temper √ |
| 好吃懒做 | laziness and a love of tippling | prefer drinking to all other occupation |
| 唠唠叨叨夹杂不清 | pernickety | make life difficult for me |
| 懒懒的 | drawled √ | 0 |
| 品行好 | model customer √ | better than most |

Through the comparison of the translation of evaluative resources vocabulary, it can be observed that Yang's translation focuses more on literal translation, with a preference for direct translation and the use of appropriate and fitting words. In contrast, Lan's translation often employs methods of free translation and transposition, emphasizing the portrayal and expression that highlight the character traits. In terms of lexical fidelity, Yang's translation is more faithful to the original text, while Lan's translation contains more subjective evaluations. For example, the phrase “好吃懒做” (lazy and fond of drinking) is translated by Yang as “laziness and a love of tippling,” while Lan translates it as “prefer drinking to all other occupation.” From the translations, Yang's version is more faithful and complete, conveying Kong Yiji's characteristics of laziness and alcohol addiction, whereas Lan's version omits the trait of laziness, retaining only the characteristic of alcohol addiction. Another example is the translation of “唠唠叨叨夹杂不清” (incessant and muddled chatter), where Yang translates it as “pernickety,” and Lan translates it as “make life difficult for me.” This is an evaluation of the short-clothed customers who buy alcohol. Yang's translation directly focuses on the evaluation of the short-clothed customers themselves, while Lan's translation emphasizes the impact of the short-clothed customers' character traits on me, focusing on the effect of the disturbance.

4.3 Appreciative Resources

Appreciative resources belong to the aesthetic domain, referring to the evaluation of things, actions, and natural phenomena, composed of reactions, constructions, and values. Kong Yiji is a destitute scholar who is not respected in society. His knowledge is not recognized as it should be in that era, but instead becomes the object of ridicule. The story takes place in a feudal society where the social environment generally lacks appreciation and recognition for individuals. People focus more on social status and wealth rather than individual talent or character. Lu Xun uses irony and tragedy in his work, revealing social injustice and the distortion of human nature through the tragic fate of Kong Yiji. The absence of appreciative resources is part of this literary effect.

Table 6. Comparison of Appreciative Resources in the Two Translations

| | Yang & Dai | Lan |
|----------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 乱蓬蓬的花白胡子 | grizzled beard | an untidy grey beard |
| 一笔好字 | a good calligrapher | a good writing hand |

In terms of the translation of appreciative resources vocabulary, Yang's translation focuses more on the effect conveyed, while Lan's translation emphasizes ease of understanding for the target language readers, adopting a translation method close to domestication. For example, in the translation of “一笔好字” (a good hand at calligraphy), Lan's translation does not choose “calligrapher” but instead uses a direct translation method. This approach could lead to misunderstandings among foreign readers, who might think Kong Yiji is a calligrapher, when in fact it is merely meant to express that he writes well.

5. Factors Influencing Translators' Translations

The final form of a translation is not only shaped by the text and context, but also deeply rooted in the translator's academic background and cultural storage. A translator's knowledge structure, research focus, and language proficiency collectively form their scholarly core, which directly influences how deeply they understand the source text and the strategies they adopt in translation. In Chinese-English literary translation, where linguistic structures, cultural meanings, and historical contexts differ greatly, the translator's learning and expertise are especially crucial. Translators of different generations, educational backgrounds, and research interests often demonstrate distinct translational approaches. Therefore, to understand the differences behind translated texts, we must first examine the translator's own academic foundation. The following section will explore Yang Xianyi's scholarly background and its impact on the cultural depth and fidelity evident in his translation practice.

5.1 Translators' Scholarly Core

Yang Xianyi's translation works span a wide range of types from ancient to modern China, including but not limited to classical literature, poetry, drama, novels, and historical documents. He and his wife, Dai Naidie, have collaborated on translations such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Li Sao*, *The Scholars*, *A Selection of Stories from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties*, and in addition to these, they have also translated Western classical masterpieces like *The Odyssey* into Chinese. Yang Xianyi's translation work is not limited to literary works; it also includes translations of Chinese traditional culture and historical documents, demonstrating his profound understanding of both Chinese and Western cultures and his linguistic abilities. Lan Shiling, as a new generation of British sinologists and translators, focuses her translation work on modern and contemporary Chinese literary works. She has translated works by modern and contemporary Chinese authors such as Lu Xun, Eileen Chang, Han Shaogong, and Yan Lianke, including *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun* and *Lust, Caution*. Therefore, in translation practice, Yang Xianyi, as a translator, is more capable of deeply understanding the intentions of the

original authors and is more faithful in the transmission process.

5.2 Translator's Translation Style

Yang Xianyi's translation style focuses on fidelity to the original text, striving to accurately convey the content and style of Lu Xun's works to the target language readers without losing their literary characteristics and profound meanings. During the translation process, he pays attention to maintaining the original tone, word choice, and sentence structure, emphasizing the reading experience that the translation brings to the readers and focusing on the conveyance of emotional effects. Although Lan Shiling's translation is also committed to fidelity to the original text, her translation style places more emphasis on the reading experience of the target language readers. When necessary, she may make appropriate adjustments to the original text to improve the fluency and readability of the translation. Lan Shiling adopts a domestication translation strategy in her translation process, reducing verbosity and making the translation more fluent, natural, and vivid. At the same time, she skillfully integrates Chinese culture into the translation, increasing the Western world's understanding of China and making an important contribution to China's engagement with the world. For example, in the translation of “显出极高兴的样子” (showing an extremely happy appearance), Yang translates it as “lit up,” while Lan translates it as “euphorically.” Yang's translation does not adhere to form, focusing on vividly and flexibly displaying the character's emotional expression, whereas Lan's translation needs to consider the acceptance of readers with different ideologies and cultures, adopting a literal translation method, and choosing words that strongly express emotions and attitudes, aiming for simplicity and easy understanding.

6. Conclusion

This paper attempts to use the appraisal theory subsystem of systemic functional linguistics as the theoretical foundation, and selects the translations of *Kong Yiji* by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, as well as Lan Shiling's version, as the research subjects for comparative study. Meanwhile, it utilizes the corpus annotation software UAM Corpus Tool to annotate and statistically analyze the attitude resources in the original and the two translations. The results of the quantitative analysis show that the distribution of various resources in the Yang translation exceeds that in the original text, while in the Lan translation, the distribution is less than that in the original text. The reasons for the differences in translation are considered to stem from the differences in the translators' academic cores and their translation styles.

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