

Original Paper

Research on the Reproduction of Original Text Style in the English Translation of Chinese Architectural Aesthetics

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Abstract

*Chinese architectural aesthetics, imbued with profound philosophical thought, cultural connotations, and artistic spirit, sees its English translation as a vital component of China's "going global" strategy for culture. However, the significant disparities between Chinese and Western thinking patterns, aesthetic systems, and linguistic structures pose a core challenge: how to accurately convey the aesthetic essence and unique style of the original text in the translation. This paper aims to systematically investigate the issue of style reproduction in the English translation of texts on Chinese architectural aesthetics. It focuses on the stylistic features of such texts at the lexical, syntactic, rhetorical, and textual levels, and the challenges encountered during cross-cultural transfer. By constructing an integrated analytical framework encompassing "Linguistic," "Cultural," and "Aesthetic" dimensions, this study selects English translations of classical and contemporary architectural texts, such as *The Craft of Gardens* and *Chinese Architecture: Art and Artisanship*, for detailed comparative case analysis. The findings reveal a trend in style reproduction strategies, shifting from a dominance of "domestication" towards a balance between "foreignization" and "compensation." Successful translations manage to preserve the poetic quality, ambiguity, and philosophical depth of the original texts within the acceptability limits of the target readers, through creative use of English lexicon and syntax, flexible handling of culture-specific terms, and skillful transplantation of rhetorical imagery. The study concludes that the reproduction of style in translating Chinese architectural aesthetics is a dynamic and creative process of "rewriting," whose ultimate goal is to achieve cultural fidelity and aesthetic equivalence, rather than mechanical word-for-word correspondence. This research holds theoretical and practical significance for enhancing the quality of translating Chinese architectural culture and deepening the dialogue between Chinese and Western architectural aesthetics.*

Keywords

Chinese Architectural Aesthetics, Style Reproduction, English Translation Strategies, Culture-Specific Terms, Aesthetic Equivalence

1. Introduction

Architecture serves as a stone-inscribed chronicle, a frozen melody, and a material carrier of national culture and aesthetic ideals. Rooted in Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophical thoughts, Chinese architectural aesthetics emphasizes “harmony between man and nature” and “learning from nature,” forming spatial concepts, construction principles, and aesthetic paradigms distinctly different from those in Western architectural systems (Wang Shu, 2012). From the ritual norms in *The Rites of Zhou: Record of Crafts* to the garden design philosophies in *Yuanye (The Craft of Gardens)*, and onto Liang Sicheng’s pioneering research in Chinese architectural history, the written discourses on Chinese architectural aesthetics constitute a rich intellectual treasure trove.

In today’s globalized world, translating these texts into English holds immeasurable value for disseminating Chinese culture and fostering mutual understanding among civilizations.

Translation is by no means a simple code-switching exercise. Particularly for architectural texts rich in cultural specificity and aesthetic connotations, the challenge lies not only in the accurate correspondence of terminology but also in effectively reproducing the unique “style”—the individuality, emotion, and artistic qualities expressed through the author’s linguistic choices—in another linguistic and cultural context. Classical Chinese architectural literature, often written in classical Chinese, is characterized by its concise language, profound imagery, and abundant metaphors and symbols. Meanwhile, contemporary architectural critique texts frequently permeate with traditional aesthetic spirits, emphasizing rhythm and cadence in their prose. These stylistic elements are prone to loss or distortion during translation into English, known for its logical precision, resulting in translations that preserve the form but lose the spirit, failing to evoke equivalent aesthetic sensations in target language readers (Liu Miqing, 2012).

Although some scholars have paid attention to the practical and theoretical issues in translating Chinese architectural culture (e.g., Chen Gang, 2004; Wang Q., 2019), systematic research focusing on the core issue of “style reproduction” remains insufficient. Existing studies often concentrate on terminology translation or are confined to single-text analyses, lacking an integrated analytical framework that combines language, culture, and aesthetics. Furthermore, with the development of translation theories and deepening cross-cultural exchanges, recent translation practices have exhibited new strategies and tendencies that urgently require organization and summary.

Based on these observations, this study proposes the following core research questions: 1. What are the typical stylistic features of Chinese architectural aesthetics texts at the lexical, syntactic, rhetorical, and discourse levels? 2. What are the main challenges and losses encountered in the process of translating these stylistic features into English? 3. What specific translation strategies can translators adopt to

achieve effective style reproduction, and how effective are they? 4. What trends are emerging in the style reproduction of contemporary Chinese architectural aesthetics in English translation?

This paper will review relevant literature, construct a three-dimensional analytical framework, and employ qualitative case study analysis to deeply analyze selected translation samples, aiming to provide valuable references for the translation practice and theoretical research of Chinese architectural aesthetics and, more broadly, Chinese cultural texts.

2. Literature Review

This study is situated at the intersection of translation studies, architectural aesthetics, and cross-cultural communication. The literature review will be conducted around three themes: “Style and Translation,” “Linguistic and Stylistic Features of Chinese Architectural Aesthetics Texts,” and “Current Research on the Translation of Chinese Architectural Culture.”

2.1 Style and Translation: Translability and Reproduction Strategies

“Style” is a central concept in literary and translation studies. Liu Miqing (2012) defines style as the “overall aesthetic effect produced by the symbolic system in conveying information” and emphasizes that the translability of style lies in the analysis and conversion of formal markers (such as phonology, lexicon, syntax, and rhetoric) and non-formal markers (such as spirit, momentum, and emotion). Venuti’s (2018) “foreignization” and “domestication” theories offer classic paradigms for managing the tension between cultural otherness and reader acceptance, providing significant guidance for translating unique cultural concepts in Chinese architectural aesthetics.

In recent years, with the development of emerging theories such as eco-translation and cognitive translation studies, research perspectives on style reproduction have become more diverse. For instance, Li Zhi (2021) proposes from an eco-translation perspective that translators need to make adaptive selection and transformation across the “linguistic dimension,” “cultural dimension,” and “communicative dimension” to maintain the overall balance of the original text’s ecology, offering insights for handling the complex relationships between language, culture, and environment in architectural aesthetics texts. Zhang Zheng (2022), from a cognitive linguistics perspective, argues that the key to style reproduction lies in the translator’s grasp and reconstruction of the original author’s cognitive patterns and image schemas. These studies provide theoretical support for constructing our analytical framework.

2.2 Linguistic and Stylistic Features of Chinese Architectural Aesthetics Texts

Chinese architectural aesthetics texts, especially classical literature, exhibit distinct linguistic styles.

At the lexical level, they extensively use culture-loaded terms such as “气运” (vitality and rhythm), “意境” (artistic conception), “借景” (borrowed scenery), and “虽由人作，宛自天开” (although made by man, it appears as if created by heaven), which integrate philosophy, aesthetics, and craftsmanship with rich yet ambiguous connotations (Zhao Chen, 2020). At the syntactic level, Chinese emphasizes parataxis, with loose sentence structures, frequent running sentences, and implicit logical relations

embedded in context, contrasting with English's emphasis on hypotaxis (Lian Shuneng, 2010). This syntactic difference directly affects the text's rhythm and momentum.

At the rhetorical and discourse levels, Chinese aesthetics texts employ metaphors, antithesis, allusions, and other rhetorical devices to create a poetic artistic conception. The discourse structure often advances in a "spiral" or "scroll-like" manner, rather than the Western linear logical argumentation (Gu, 2021). These features collectively constitute a Chinese architectural aesthetics text's implicit, ethereal, and associative aesthetic style, posing significant challenges for translation.

2.3 Current Research on the Translation of Chinese Architectural Culture

Domestic research on the translation of Chinese architectural culture has accumulated certain achievements. Early studies mainly focused on terminology standardization and translation principles (e.g., Chen Gang, 2004). In recent years, research perspectives have shifted to the translation and reception of specific texts. For example, Wang Qian (2021) analyzed the translation strategy changes of cultural images in multiple English versions of Yuanye, finding that later versions (such as Alison Hardie's) tend to adopt foreignization strategies more than earlier ones, preserving the original's cultural identity.

Liu Hong (2022), through studying the English version of Liang Sicheng's *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, pointed out that Liang successfully introduced the Chinese architectural system and its aesthetic values to the Western academic community through creative English writing (rather than simple translation), serving as a successful example of style reproduction. Additionally, some scholars have begun to pay attention to the translation of works by contemporary Chinese architects, such as He Wei and Wang Shu, in international contexts (Li, 2023). These studies provide valuable case references for our research.

However, reviewing the existing literature, systematic and theoretical research focusing on the core issue of "style reproduction" remains scarce. Most studies either emphasize language conversion techniques or focus on cultural transmission effects, failing to organically integrate linguistic forms, cultural connotations, and aesthetic effects for an integrated analysis. This study aims to fill this gap by constructing a more comprehensive analytical framework and conducting in-depth examinations of recent translation practices.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, with textual close reading and comparative analysis as the primary methods. The core is to construct a multi-dimensional analytical framework and conduct in-depth analyses of selected cases.

3.1 Construction of the Analytical Framework

Drawing on Liu Miqing's (2012) stylistic semiotics theory and Li Zhi's (2021) eco-translatology three-dimensional transformation theory, this study constructs a comprehensive analytical framework comprising three dimensions to examine style reproduction practices:

Linguistic dimension focuses on the conversion of superficial stylistic markers such as vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. Translation strategies for culture-loaded terms, technical terms, and archaic words; strategies for converting parataxis to hypotaxis, handling running sentences and subjectless sentences, and adjusting word order; and adjusting cohesion and coherence means and reorganizing paragraph structures.

Cultural dimension focuses on the transmission of cultural images, philosophical concepts, and aesthetic categories. How to translate architectural elements (such as “pavilions, terraces, and towers”), aesthetic concepts (such as “artistic conception”), and historical allusions; and how to convey core philosophical ideas such as “harmony between man and nature” and “coexistence of emptiness and solidity.”

Aesthetic dimension focuses on examining the reproduction of overall aesthetic effects, such as poetic beauty, vitality, and rhythm. The transplantation effects of rhetorical devices such as metaphors and antithesis; and whether the overall emotional tone and spatial atmosphere created by the original text are preserved.

3.2 Case Selection

To ensure representativeness and timeliness, this study selects two groups of texts and their English translations as analytical cases:

Classical Literature Group: Ji Cheng’s *Yuanye* (1631). Two representative English translations are selected: one is Chen Zhi’s annotated version (1988); the other is Alison Hardie’s complete translation (2012). *Yuanye* is the pinnacle of ancient Chinese garden design theory, characterized by a combination of parallel and loose prose, beautiful diction, and profound artistic conception, making it an excellent sample for analyzing the reproduction of classical aesthetic styles.

Contemporary Literature Group: Li Yunshen’s *Huaxia Yijiang* (1982) and its English translation *Chinese Architecture: Art and Artisanship* (2021). This book systematically discusses the design principles and aesthetics of traditional Chinese architecture, with language that is both academic and literary. Its recently published English translation reflects new trends in contemporary translation practices.

3.3 Analytical Process

For each case, the following steps will be followed: First, identify representative sentences or paragraphs from the original text that embody its stylistic features. Second, compare the treatments of these sentences or paragraphs in different translations (if available) or analyze a single translation. Third, apply the three-dimensional analytical framework to describe in detail the strategies adopted by the translator in the linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions. Fourth, evaluate the gains and losses and effectiveness of these strategies in terms of style reproduction.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Based on the above analytical framework, a comparative analysis of the selected cases yields the following results:

4.1 Style Reproduction at the Lexical Level: Challenges and Strategies for Culture-Loaded Terms

One of the core stylistic features of Chinese architectural aesthetics texts lies in their highly condensed and richly connoted vocabulary.

Case 1: “世之兴造，专主鸠匠，独不闻三分匠、七分主人之谚乎？”

Chen Zhi's translation: “In the construction work of the world, the master carpenter is solely relied on. Has one never heard the saying that the carpenter accounts for three tenths and the owner for seven tenths of the accomplishment?”

Hardie's translation: “In the construction projects of this world, people put their trust entirely in the master craftsman. Has no one ever heard the saying, ‘The work is three parts craftsman and seven parts owner’?”

Analysis: “匠” (carpenter) and “主人” (owner) here do not refer to specific craftsmen and property owners but metaphorically represent the relationship between “skill” and “conception,” “rules” and “interest.” Both translations adopt a combination of literal and interpretive translation strategies. Chen's translation uses “accomplishment” to clarify the deeper meaning of “成就” (achievement), showing a slight domestication tendency. Hardie, on the other hand, remains more faithful to the literal meaning, preserving the proverb's form and allowing readers to grasp its symbolic meaning through context, exhibiting a higher degree of foreignization and closer adherence to the original's implicit style. Culturally, Hardie's translation better conveys the philosophical idea in traditional Chinese construction that emphasizes conception and interest.

Case 2: The frequent appearance of “气韵” (vitality and rhythm) in Huaxia Yijiang.

English translation: Mostly translated as “rhythmic vitality” or “spiritual resonance,” sometimes contextually interpreted as “a sense of life” or “the breath of nature.”

Analysis: “气韵” is a core category in Chinese classical aesthetics, originating from painting theory and used in architecture to refer to the vitality and spiritual rhythm of space. Literal translation is nearly impossible. Translating it as “rhythmic vitality” captures the elements of “dynamism” and “life” and is an effective compensation strategy (Zhang & Chen, 2023). Although it does not fully correspond linguistically, it attempts to reconstruct the original's vivid and harmonious aesthetic effect in the aesthetic dimension.

4.2 Stylistic Reproduction at the Syntactic Level: Creative Transformation from Parataxis to Hypotaxis

The flowing sentences and paratactic structures in Chinese constitute essential elements of its relaxed and flexible writing style.

Case 3: Sentence excerpt from *Yuan Ye · On Gardens*: “A temple is hidden within a round window, resembling a small painting by Li Zhaodao; Mountain peaks are piled up from split rocks, irregularly rising like the works of Huang Gongwang.”

Hardie's Translation: "A temple is hidden in a round window, as if it were a small painting by Li Zhaodao; Layers of mountain peaks are built up from split rocks, rising irregularly in an imitation of Huang Gongwang."

Analysis: The original text comprises two paratactic sentences constructed in antithesis, featuring juxtaposed imagery that creates a vivid sense of visuality.

Hardie's translation externalizes the implicit logical relationships by incorporating the conjunction "as if" and the participial phrase "rising irregularly in an imitation of," adhering to the hypotactic characteristics of English. Simultaneously, she preserves the parallel structure of the two clauses with a semicolon, reproducing the antithetical beauty of the original to a certain extent. This approach constitutes a necessary linguistic adjustment and, at the aesthetic level, successfully conveys the picturesque ambiance by reconstructing the syntactic rhythm. It exemplifies creative transformation.

4.3 Stylistic Reproduction in Rhetorical and Aesthetic Dimensions: Transplantation of Imagery and Poetic Essence

Chinese architectural texts frequently utilize literary rhetoric to portray spatial atmospheres.

Case 4: Description of "borrowed scenery" (借景) in Yuan Ye: "Borrowing scenery is the paramount aspect of gardens. There exists borrowing from afar, borrowing from nearby, borrowing from above, borrowing from below, and borrowing according to the season."

Hardie's Translation: "'Borrowing Scenery' is the most important aspect in a forest garden. There is 'Borrowing Scenery from Afar', 'Borrowing Scenery from Nearby', 'Borrowing Scenery from Above', 'Borrowing Scenery from Below', and 'Borrowing Scenery according to the Season'."

Analysis: "Borrowed scenery" (借景) represents a unique aesthetic concept in Chinese gardens, serving as a highly condensed metaphor. Hardie adopts a strategy combining transliteration and literal translation, consistently using the creative term "Borrowing Scenery" thereafter. This approach not only marks its cultural specificity upon initial appearance (foreignization) but also ensures subsequent readability through an easily understandable English phrase. For terms like "borrowing from afar" and "borrowing from nearby," she employs a uniform "Borrowing...from..." structure, accurately conveying technical meanings while preserving the rhetorical effect of parallelism from the original, achieving a high level of reproduction in both cultural and aesthetic dimensions.

4.4 Developmental Trend: From Information Transmission to Holistic Reproduction of Style and Culture

A comparative analysis of the early introductory translations of Yuan Ye with Hardie's complete translation, as well as the recent English translation of Chinese Architecture: Art and Artisanship, reveals a clear developmental trajectory. Early translations prioritized accurate information transmission, often employing extensive domestication strategies and explanatory text, sometimes at the expense of literary quality. In contrast, recent translations exhibit greater confidence, favoring foreignization strategies and striving to preserve the linguistic features, cultural identity, and aesthetic qualities of the original within the constraints of target language norms (Wang Q., 2021; Li, 2023).

Translators now transcend their traditional role, evolving into cultural interpreters and stylistic re-creators who emphasize balancing and integrating linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions.

5. Conclusions

This study systematically examines the English translation of representative texts on Chinese architectural aesthetics through a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing language, culture, and aesthetics, aiming to explore the reproduction of original style. The research yields the following conclusions:

Firstly, reproducing the style of Chinese architectural aesthetic texts is a complex and challenging task, primarily due to fundamental differences between the Chinese and English language systems and their underlying aesthetic traditions. Successful translation does not pursue mechanical word-for-word equivalence but rather engages in creative rewriting aimed at achieving “aesthetic equivalence.”

Secondly, to achieve effective stylistic reproduction, translators must employ a flexible and diverse set of strategies. These include, at the lexical level, strategies such as “literal translation with annotation” “creative neologism,” and “contextual free translation” for culturally loaded terms; at the syntactic level, transforming Chinese parataxis into idiomatic English hypotaxis through skillful use of conjunctions, participial structures, and word order adjustments while preserving the rhythm and momentum of the original; and at the rhetorical and textual level, endeavoring to transplant rhetorical devices like antithesis and metaphor, as well as reproducing the original’s artistic conception and charm through paragraph layout. The use of compensatory strategies is particularly crucial when direct correspondence is unattainable, necessitating aesthetic effect compensation at another level.

Thirdly, this study observes a significant trend in contemporary English translations of Chinese architectural aesthetics: a shift from a past model dominated by “domestication” and focused on information transmission to a current model emphasizing “foreignization” and “compensation,” pursuing holistic reproduction of style and culture. This transformation reflects the rising cultural confidence of China and its adherence to cultural distinctiveness in the context of globalization.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its expansion of stylistic reproduction research from traditional literary texts to highly specialized and culturally rich architectural aesthetic texts, proposing an integrated analytical framework that provides methodological references for similar cultural translation studies. Its practical significance resides in its research conclusions, which can directly guide translation practice, assisting translators in making theoretically conscious and culturally sensitive choices when handling “deep-level” cultural texts on Chinese architecture, art, philosophy, and related fields.

The study’s limitations include the restricted scope of case selection. Future research could extend to analyzing English translations of works by more contemporary architects and critics, employing empirical methods such as reader receptivity surveys to further validate the practical effects of stylistic reproduction. Ultimately, the path to stylistic reproduction in English translations of Chinese

architectural aesthetics is one of seeking creative fusion between two cultures and two aesthetics, with the ultimate goal of enabling the world not only to “understand” Chinese architecture but also to “feel” the vibrant aesthetic soul that beats beneath its surface.

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