

A Study of The English Translation of Cao Wenxuan's Bronze and Sunflower from the Aesthetic Perspective

Junnan Du, Zhenwei Hu*

Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, 130000, China

*Corresponding Author.

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Abstract: Guided by Liu Miqing's theory of translation aesthetics, this paper systematically compares the English translation of Cao Wenxuan's children's literature *Bronze and Sunflower* with the original work from the perspective of aesthetics and explores the cross-cultural transmission strategies and effects of aesthetic information in the translation process. Focusing on the unique aesthetic attributes of children's literature, this study compares and analyzes the original text and the English translation from the dimensions of phonetics, vocabulary, and sentence structure, and reveals the translator's practice of aesthetic subjectivity at the three levels of childishness interest, phonology and readability. Through close reading and comparison of the texts, it is found that the translators flexibly use alliteration, repetition, rhythm adjustment, and other techniques to strengthen the musicality of the text through strategies such as the rhythmic reconstruction of onomatopoeia, the transformation of colloquial expressions, and the transplantation of dynamic imagery, while retaining the characteristics of the original vernacular poetics, and improving the reading experience of children readers by simplifying compound sentences and adding connecting words. This paper further demonstrates the applicability of translation aesthetic theory to the translation of children's literature.

1. Introduction

Chinese children's literature is gaining global recognition, making the cross-cultural transmission of its aesthetic qualities an urgent challenge. Drawing on Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics, translated texts are treated in this paper as aesthetic objects, with linguistic features examined across phonological, lexical, and syntactic dimensions. Particular attention falls on how the translator's aesthetic subjectivity surfaces-through childlike appeal, rhythmic resonance, and textual accessibility-often achieved by recasting the original's poetic and narrative styles. Current scholarship, however, still tilts heavily toward linguistic equivalence and readability, largely ignoring the translator's aesthetic contribution.

Despite Cao Wenxuan's international renown, deep analyses of how his aesthetics survive translation remain thin on the ground. Liu Miqing's aesthetic framework proves exceptionally useful for navigating interlingual difficulties, yet it has barely been brought to bear on children's literature. Focusing on *Bronze and Sunflower*, the paper examines how childishness, phonology, and readability

are actually realized in translation and suggests practical strategies that may inspire other translators, and help push Chinese children's literature further onto the world.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction of the Author Cao Wenxuan

Rooted in the water towns of rural Jiangsu, the writer, Cao Wenxuan draws endless creative fuel from the landscapes of his youth. The environment of his childhood was full of the natural atmosphere of the water towns in northern Jiangsu Province, and the reeds, rivers, and idyllic scenery became an important source of inspiration for his later literary creation. The simplicity of the countryside and the natural landscape also became the background of his creation, which in turn influenced the characteristics of his writing. His words are as soft, delicate, and beautiful as the streams in the water countryside, and he often uses them to explore life, suffering and human nature, using metaphors and symbols to lightly outline heavy themes. He says that he writes "for people", and that he does not treat children as specific objects of his writing.

His works, such as *Grass House* and *Bronze and Sunflower*, have won the National Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, the China Publishing Government Award, the China Outstanding Publication Award, and other important domestic awards. His works have been translated many times into more than 20 languages such as English, French, German, Japanese, and so on.

In 2016, The book *Bronze and Sunflower* was awarded The International Hans Christian Andersen Prize for "Writing about childhood with sadness and bitterness, setting an example of facing up to challenges," which is also known as the "Nobel Prize in Children's Literature". Cao Wenxuan is also the first Chinese writer to win this award. In 2005, it won the "National Outstanding Children's Literature Award" for its "pure literature" and "true children's heart", and was hailed as "the benchmark of Chinese children's literature". *Bronze and Sunflower* was also adapted into a children's theatre and won the Jiangsu Wenhua Award in 2019.

2.2 Introduction of *Bronze and Sunflower*

The title of the book, *Bronze and Sunflower*, comes from the names of the two main characters, a mute boy named Bronze who lives in a poor countryside, and a girl from the city named Sunflower. Their names Bronze and Sunflower symbolize their resilience in the face of a life of suffering and their tenacity to thrive and always chase the sunshine.

The story is set in rural China and centers around these two children. Sunflower, a girl from the city, lost her parents in a flood and was adopted by a poor rural family, of which Bronze was a child. Although Bronze's family lived a hard life, they accepted Sunflower with selfless love and gave her the best they could. Even Bronze gave up his chance to go to school so that Sunflower could continue to go to school. Later, Sunflower had to leave Bronze's home and return to the city. At the moment of parting, excitement and reluctance deeply overwhelmed Bronze, who miraculously shouted out Sunflower's name, and that was the end of the story.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Aesthetic Value of the English Translation

Aesthetic value has two important characteristics. Firstly, it is dynamic. People from different times and cultural backgrounds may have varying understandings of beauty. Secondly, there is both commonality and individuality. Chen Bochui once characterized translation as "a true act of

recreation,” accomplished through “rephrasing” or “rewriting.” This recreation reconstructs the thoughts and emotional qualities of the original, fulfilling literature’s fundamental task, which is “transforming people’s thoughts.”

3.2 Embodiment of Aesthetics in Children’s Literature

To the question of the embodiment of aesthetics in children’s literature, Chen Bochui shows it is vital to facilitate children’s growth in reading and to promote their all-round development through education and aesthetic cultivation. He further asserts that the linguistic challenges inherent in translating foreign children’s literature to Chinese contexts should be addressed by employing straightforward and unadorned language in translation, thereby fostering a shared understanding and emotional resonance between readers and texts. This same reasoning applies to the translation of Chinese children’s literature.

3.2.1 Childishness

Childishness is an artistic reflection in literary works that aligns with the psychological characteristics of children and the tonal interests of children’s language actions. When translating children’s literature, the translator must start from the perspective of children, listening with a child’s ears, observing with a child’s eyes, and experiencing with a child’s heart.

In a sky that stretches on forever, broken occasionally by a cloud or two, but otherwise huge and unblemished, like a perfect turquoise gemstone[1].

Helen Wang chose the expression “turquoise gemstone”. She must have read and understood what Cao Wenxuan wanted to express, and she also understood the psychology of foreign children. With children’s minds and understanding, it is natural to choose gemstones, because in foreign countries, gemstones are highly prized, while Chinese people think that slate, such as jade, is more valuable.

3.2.2 Phonology

Phonology is the musicality and auditory beauty formed through the rhythm, rhyme, onomatopoeia, and other techniques of language in children’s literature, which is the core feature of children’s literature to attract children’s readers and enhance memory and interest. Instead of just focusing on the meaning of the words, Helen Wang focuses on the form of the language, such as the phonology, and the choice of words, such as

When roses bloom in the spring
And the silkworm season begins,
The women go out to pick mulberry leaves
In pairs, in pairs.
Their baskets hang from the mulberry trees
And they strip the branches bare
In tears, in tears[1].

This nursery rhyme has a strong local flavor, rich in the unique characteristics and rhythm of Chinese culture, and the content expressed between sentences is closely linked. Helen Wang used the methods of augmentation and paraphrasing, but in the end, she also retained the rhyme and the sense of rhyme well. In the first line, she uses two lines, “When roses bloom in the spring.” and “And the silkworm season.” She explains the meaning of this line and rhymes with the words “spring” and “begins” at the end. She uses the word “spring” instead of “April” in the original.

In the middle three sentences, “The women go out to pick mulberry leaves”, “In pairs, in pairs.”, and “Their baskets hang from the mulberry trees.” she uses “s” as a consecutive ending on the word at the end of each sentence to make the reader feel catchy. In the last line, “And they strip the branches

bare. In tears, in tears.” Helen Wang once again splits one line into two. this method of splitting and translating twice has a certain aesthetic quality, echoing the beginning and end of the nursery rhyme. The most aesthetically pleasing points of the translation are “in pairs, in pairs.” and “in tears, in tears,” which form a rhyming couplet.

3.2.3 Readability

The thinking pattern in Chinese differs from that in English; in Chinese, the sentence structure is general before specific, while in English, it is the opposite, specific before general. So, the translator translated the sentences, such as

(1) She was alone, like a solitary bird in a vast blue sky with nothing for company but the sound of its own beating wings[1].

(2) Bronze was lonely. As lonely as the only bird in the sky, the only fish in the river, the only horse on the steppes[1].

In these translations, Helen Wang keeps Cao Wenxuan’s metaphors intact. She compares Sunflower’s loneliness to a solitary bird, and Bronze’s to that of a lone bird, fish, or horse. These striking, vivid comparisons do more than just paint a picture; they deepen the reader’s sense of the story’s lonely atmosphere, spark the imagination, and draw them right into the heart of the narrative.

4. Aesthetics Embodied in the Translation of *Bronze and Sunflower*

4.1 Aesthetic Translation on the Phonology Level

Nursery rhymes are rich in distinct rhythms and melodies, making it easy for children to sing along, and they possess a strong musicality; on the other hand, onomatopoeia simulates various external sounds, evoking the reader’s auditory aesthetics. “Nursery rhyme” is defined in the *Xinhua Dictionary* as: “Children’s stories in the form of rhymed poetry, songs popular among children,” characterized by clear lyrical rhythms, being catchy, and lively language, which children are eager to imitate and sing after learning from adults, such as

The rice cakes smell sweet,
Their scent fills the kitchen.
The leaves smell so sweet,
Their scent fills the house...[1]

Sunflower heard a girl across the river singing this song, and later she began to learn to sing it as well. The content of this ballad is a singing style depicting the scene around the Dragon Boat Festival, where people are making dumplings in their kitchens and preparing food for the festival. In the original text, the eight lines all end with the same rhyme scheme, which is the Chinese phonetic alphabets in which the final is “ang”.

In the translation, Helen Wang chose to pronounce both words with the sound of “s” at the end. Like Liu Miqing’s theoretical conception, the translator uses the “s” sound continuously in the translation, so that the readers can fully feel that the speed of speech is not too fast and not too dry, slow and long, and full of the rhythmic effect that should be found in nursery rhymes.

4.2 Aesthetic Translation on the Lexical Level

In Liu Miqing’s aesthetics of translation, he believes that bilingual conversion between different language families should endeavor to achieve correspondence as well as reconstruction, to achieve “beauty of form”, but later in the text, he also makes requirements on translation. When translating the original text, the translator should retain the characteristics of the original text, the original text

with simple characteristics, and the translator should not just pursue the beauty of the translation. If the original text is plain and simple, the translator should follow the simplicity of the original text when translating.

For Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze and Sunflower*, Helen Wang encountered a big problem when translating the characters. When translated the character "Bronze's grandmother", Helen Wang ultimately chose the word "nainai", a term with strong Eastern connotations, rather than a direct translation such as "grandmother", in order to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the Chinese language.

In the same way, Helen Wang translates the titles of relatives, using Chinese phonetic alphabets, Chinese characters, and English explanations. So, when reading these words, foreign readers can experience the strong cultural atmosphere of the East.

4.3 Aesthetic Translation on the Syntactical Level

Liu Miqing's idea of aesthetic translation is that firstly the translator should have a deep understanding of the original text, and then he or she can make a reconstructive translation in the process of translation. As Liu Miqing's idea, Helen Wang, in translating *Bronze and Sunflower*, adds her original content in the reconstruction of the content in the passages of the article, bringing different colors to this work.

As Gayu hung from the tree, he looked at the moon in the sky and began to cry. "Go away! Get lost!" he yelled at the children who were gathering around. He kicked at them, but in vain. It just made him swing even more[1].

Gayu is a child who often teases Sunflower. In the original article, it ends here, but in Helen Wang's writing, she has further translated and illustrated the article. Gayu was hanging from the tree, kicking his legs as hard as he could, which did nothing for the children watching, but just made Gayu swing even more. Helen Wang concludes with "It just made him swing even more". She ended with this line, which not only recreates the original comedic effect of the original text but adds extra interest to this story.

4.4 Aesthetic Translation on the Textual Level

The original text's paragraph divisions do not strictly follow the hierarchy of content, time, or spatial order, resulting in many paragraphs consisting of only one or two short sentences. So, the translator made certain integrations based on the degree of content connection, and made the paragraph content more compact and more in line with the reading habits of the target audience.

In addition, the way of "Chinese phonetic alphabets and Chinese characters" was used in the chapter where Sunflower teaches Bronze to write. In that chapter, Helen Wang also added English explanations of the words. For example,

Bronze was hungry to learn and gobbled up every character Sunflower knew, writing them out on the ground and in his notebook. The two of them never stopped. Wherever they went, whatever they saw, Bronze wanted to know what the characters were. He learned how to write the characters for buffalo and sheep. He also learned how to put characters together to build sentences[1].

Helen Wang has rewritten and condensed the content in translating this paragraph, fusing the original loose Chinese sentences into a whole. The word "hungry" in the first sentence is full of Bronze's desire and eagerness to learn to write[2]. Facing foreign child readers unfamiliar with Chinese characters, Helen Wang first briefly summarizes Bronze's journey from learning single characters to forming words, then supplements the pinyin and interpretation of the Chinese characters.

5. Conclusion

As Chinese children's literature gains traction worldwide, conveying its aesthetic values across cultures has become a vital mission. Viewing this through Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics, the study breaks down the aesthetics of children's literature translation into childishness, phonology, and readability. It finds that Helen Wang's work successfully captures this aesthetic essence across phonological, lexical, syntactical, and textual dimensions. This paper has its limitations; the author's grasp of translation aesthetics is still developing. Hopefully, this thesis can spark ideas for future, more in-depth explorations from other aesthetic angles, helping to further share the unique charm of Chinese children's literature.

References

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