
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research on the English Translation of The Book of Songs from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics: A Case Study of *Xiao Ya-Cai Wei*

Tan Xiaoying¹, Lyu Yihong², and Li Peilong³✉

¹²³*School of Languages and Cultures, Youjiang Medical University for Nationalities, 533000, Baise, China*

Corresponding Author: Li Peilong, **E-mail:** lipeilong@ymun.edu.cn

| ABSTRACT

The English translation of the Chinese classic *The Book of Songs* serves as an important bridge for cultural exchange between China and the West, profoundly influencing the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad. This paper explores how to improve the quality of English translations of *The Book of Songs* by considering reader reception, using the widely circulated excerpt *Xiao Ya · Cai Wei* as a case study. Employing a comparative analysis of the two classic translations by the well-known Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong and the renowned British translator James Legge, this study found the two translations have their respective pros and cons. To improve translation quality for future international dissemination of Chinese culture, a form of collaborative translation by Chinese and English-speaking translators is recommended.

| KEYWORDS

English translation of *The Book of Songs*; reception aesthetics; *Xiao Ya · Cai Wei*; translation comparison

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 14 October 2024

PUBLISHED: 09 November 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijels.2024.6.4.9

1. Introduction

The Book of Songs ranks first among the five classics of Chinese literature, standing as a brilliant treasure of Chinese culture and holding a significant historical position in world culture, comparable to the Homeric epics and Shakespearean plays. The English translation of *The Book of Songs* began in 1736 when the Englishman R. Brooks translated the French version of *Description de la Chine*, which included eight famous pieces such as "Tian Zuo," "Huang Yi," and "Da Ya · Yi" (Ma Zuyi, Ren Rongzhen, 2003). Since then, the English translation of *The Book of Songs* has a history of over three hundred years. During this period, multiple versions of English translations have emerged, ranging from complete translations that present the original text comprehensively to selected translations that feature carefully chosen chapters, appearing one after another like bamboo shoots after a rain (Wang Hong, 2012). To date, there have been dozens of complete, excerpted, or selected translations. However, existing English translations of *The Book of Songs* still have problems or limitations, such as inadequate or misinterpreted understanding of specific vocabulary or cultural backgrounds, and inappropriate translation strategies. These issues lead to improper cultural imagery transmission and deviations from the original meaning, increasing the difficulty for readers' understanding or exacerbating cultural conflicts, which is detrimental to the global spread of Chinese culture.

The Book of Songs is a critical carrier for cultural exchange between China and the West. Different English translation versions may shape varying images of *The Book of Songs* within the English-speaking world, affecting its status and acceptance in Western culture. By studying these issues and reader reception, we can improve and enhance translations to more accurately reflect the spirit and connotations of the original text. New English translation versions of *The Book of Songs* can also use more appropriate language and expressions to make it easier for international readers to understand and accept Chinese culture, thereby enhancing the influence and public recognition of *The Book of Songs* on the international stage.

There are significant differences between Eastern and Western values, cultures, and ways of thinking. To enable Western readers to understand and accept Chinese culture, it is essential to consider their perspective. Reception aesthetics focuses on reader reception and constantly reminds translators to maintain a strong awareness of their audience, enabling them to consider readers' perspectives during translation, thereby overcoming various barriers to spreading Chinese culture. This paper attempts to conduct a comparative analysis of two widely circulated English translations of *Xiao Ya · Cai Wei* under the theoretical framework of reception aesthetics, exploring how to enhance reader acceptance while improving the quality of English translations of *The Book of Songs*, accelerating reader understanding, and increasing global interest in Chinese culture.

2. Reception Aesthetics

Reception aesthetics, also known as reception theory, is a new research paradigm that has emerged in the field of literary studies over the past few decades. This theory centers on the reader, overturning the traditional research perspective that focuses on the author or the work. It places the reader's reception and response at the forefront of literary research, providing new perspectives and tools for understanding the intrinsic value and social impact of literary works. Reception aesthetics asserts that the meaning and value of literary works are formed during the reader's reading and understanding process, rather than existing purely within the text or the author's intentions (Chen Rong, 2021). The development of reception aesthetics theory is largely credited to German literary theorists Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser (Chen Wenhui, 2018). The historical life of a literary work is unimaginable without the active participation of its receivers. Only through the reader's reading process can a work enter a continuously changing experiential horizon (Hans Robert Jauss, 1989). Iser believes that the meaning of a work arises only in the reading process as a product of the interaction between the work and the reader (Wolfgang Iser, 1987).

Under the theoretical framework of reception aesthetics, readers do not approach literary works with a blank slate; they come equipped with a series of conscious or unconscious preparations. These preparations include aesthetic experience, life experience, cultural level, and appreciation ability, collectively forming a pre-existing understanding structure and knowledge framework, known as the "horizon of expectations." The "horizon of expectations" serves as the starting point for readers to interact with the work and provides the foundation for their interpretation and acceptance. Throughout the reading process, readers actively construct meaning by contrasting and integrating their reading aesthetic experiences with their "horizon of expectations." This integration process is not one-way; rather, it is a two-way interaction. As readers comprehend the work, they continually adjust and expand their "horizon of expectations." When readers align their reading aesthetic experiences with their "horizon of expectations," they achieve a state of "horizon fusion." In this state, readers can more deeply appreciate the meaning and aesthetic value of the work while further enriching and deepening their "horizon of expectations" (She Dan, Jiang Xiao, 2021).

3. Comparative Analysis of Translations

Original Poem of *Xiao Ya · Cai Wei*:

昔我往矣，杨柳依依。
今我来思，雨雪霏霏。
行道迟迟，载渴载饥。
我心伤悲，莫知我哀。

English translation one:

When I left here,
Willows shed tears.
I come back now.
Snow bends the bough.
Long, long the way;
Hard, hard the day.
Hunger and thirst
Press me the worst.
My grief o'er flows.
Who knows? Who knows?
(Xu Yuanchong, 1992: 29)

This translation is by the well-known Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong. Professor Xu employs a systematic and comprehensive translation strategy and method to render famous Chinese poems into English verse, and his translations gained widespread admiration from readers. His theory of translation aesthetics, namely the "Three Beauties" principle that poetry translation should achieve beauty in meaning, sound, and form, has a significant influence on the translation field in China.

In reception aesthetics, the reader's "horizon of expectations" is fundamental to understanding and accepting literary works. *Xiao Ya · Cai Wei* is regarded as a classic piece within *The Book of Songs*, now generally considered an anti-war poem. The

original poem's language is concise and rhythmic, carrying deep emotions related to the parting sorrows of ancient soldiers. Xu Yuanchong's translation attempts to recreate this classical sentiment within the English reader's "horizon of expectations." He employs rhyme and concise sentences to mimic the original poem's rhythmic quality while using word choices to convey the poem's emotions. This translation is mainly interpretative, capturing the emotional essence and imagery of the original text. For instance, "杨柳依依" is translated as "Willows shed a tear," using personification to express the willows' reluctance to part, allowing English readers to feel the lyricism of the original poem. The translation tries to preserve the rhythm and rhyme of the original poem. Phrases like "Long, long the way; Hard, hard the day" and "Hunger and thirst Press me the worst" utilize repetition and rhyme, enhancing the poem's rhythmic quality. Internal rhymes appear in phrases such as "left here" "tear," "come back now" and "bends the bough," which, although not strict rhymes, provide a rhythmic echo of the original poem. This treatment enhances the poem's emotional impact, making it easier for readers to resonate with it. The translation conveys the original poem's imagery and emotions with fewer words, maintaining a concise structure that directly reaches the readers' hearts.

However, due to cultural differences and linguistic limitations, some imagery in the original text is not well-represented in the translation. For example, "雨雪霏霏" is translated as "Snow bends the bough." While this depicts the snow weighing down the branches, the imagery of "rain" is lost in the translation. Some phrases or expressions in the translation may lack precision, such as "Hard, hard the day," which does not fully convey the meaning of "行道迟迟," leading to a semantic deviation from the original poem. Additionally, certain expressions seem somewhat awkward, such as "My grief o'er flows. Who knows? Who knows?" Here, "o'er flows" and the repeated "Who knows?" express sadness but feel somewhat stiff and unnatural. These factors may increase reading difficulty, hindering comprehension and preventing readers' complete "horizon fusion."

English translation two:

At first, when we set out,
The willows were fresh and green;
Now, when we shall be returning,
The snow will be falling in clouds.
Long and tedious will be our marching;
We shall hunger; we shall thirst.
Our hearts are wounded with grief,
And no one knows our sadness.
(Wang Rongpei, Wang Hong, 2009: 102)

James Legge is considered the first British sinologist to systematically study and translate ancient Chinese classics, making significant contributions to the English translation of *The Book of Songs*. He is referred to as "one of the three great constellations of British sinology and one of the three masters of translating Chinese texts into European languages" (Yue Feng, 2006). Legge produced three English versions of *The Book of Songs*: a free translation in 1871, a verse translation in 1876, and an excerpted translation related to religious themes in 1879, with the 1871 version being the most influential and still regarded as the standard version today (Li Guangwei, Yue Feng, 2019). This paper focuses on his 1871 translation.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the reader's "horizon of expectations" is crucial for understanding literary works. The natural imagery in the original poem, such as "杨柳依依" and "雨雪霏霏", embodies complex emotions of parting, longing, and loneliness. This translation attempts to recreate this classical atmosphere within the "horizon of expectations" of English readers. However, it does not fully preserve the original poem's poetic quality and rhythm, opting for more straightforward expressions. For example, "The willows were fresh and green" and "The snow will be falling in clouds" describe the willows at the beginning as "fresh and green" and the returning snow as "falling in clouds," adding some specific descriptions that illustrate the imagery of willows and snow in the original text. These descriptions are rich in poetic quality and enhance the imagery of the poem, making it easier for readers to visualize the scenes depicted. The emotional expression in this translation is relatively smooth, without obvious breaks or stiffness. For example, "Our hearts are wounded with grief, And no one knows our sadness" directly expresses the soldiers' sadness and loneliness, in contrast to the original poem's "我心伤悲，莫知我哀". This straightforward expression may align better with the "horizon of expectations" of English readers, helping them understand and feel the emotions of the poem, and allowing them to connect with the soldiers' loneliness and sadness depicted in the original text.

However, in terms of cultural adaptation, this translation adopts a more direct strategy by transforming the implicit emotions of Chinese classical poetry into English through literal translation. While this method ensures that English readers can understand the core emotions of the poem, it also simplifies the poem's complexity and multi-layered emotional expression to some extent. This may create a gap between the readers' "horizon of expectations" and the original poem's intent, affecting their deeper understanding of the work. For instance, "no one knows our sadness" does not fully convey the meaning of "莫知我哀," leading to a semantic deviation between the translation and the original, losing the implicit and profound emotional resonance of the original poem. Expressions like "the snow will be falling in clouds" might sound less natural in the English language,

affecting the poem's fluidity. Additionally, "Willows Were Fresh and green" fails to fully retain the poetic quality and rhythm of the original text.

Xu Yuanchong, a renowned translator of Chinese literature, has a deeper understanding of his country's culture and poetic aesthetics, resulting in better preservation of rhythm and musicality in his translations. However, as a non-native English speaker, he sometimes overthinks word choices to achieve rhythmic quality, which, due to cultural differences, may not align well with readers' "horizon of expectations." In contrast, Legge, being a native English speaker, possesses unique advantages in language use and reader cognition, making his imagery presentation and emotional conveyance more aligned with readers' reading habits. The deeper understanding of the original text by domestic scholars, along with their insistence on the beauty of poetic rhythm, combined with the proficient use of the English language by native speakers and their understanding of English readers' cultural context, could lead to a strong partnership. Therefore, future new translations could adopt a collaborative model between Chinese and English to improve the quality of translations of *The Book of Songs* and promote the dissemination of Chinese culture.

4. Conclusion

In summary, reception aesthetics provides a new perspective for the study of English translations of *The Book of Songs*. To enhance the quality of these translations, translators should pay more attention to the readers' "horizon of expectations." Collaborative approaches can help retain the aesthetic characteristics of the original poem while ensuring that the translations can cross cultural and linguistic barriers, accurately conveying the spirit and connotations of the original text. Influential readers shape reading trends and dominate the direction of reading, guiding more people to pay attention to Chinese classics; ordinary readers help disseminate Chinese values and culture widely and are key to expanding the influence of Chinese culture (Hu Zuoyou, Liu Mengjie, 2023). Currently, the translation of Chinese culture is still in its early stages, and it is crucial to attract readers' interest to lay the foundation for the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture. The barriers of language and culture present challenges for target language readers in understanding Chinese culture, and the excellent Chinese culture going global should accept that it will inevitably face linguistic and cultural shocks during this process. Furthermore, cultural acceptance must undergo filtering and localization, as foreign cultures can only develop once they are accepted (Zha Mingjian, 2018). Guided by reception aesthetics, a reader-centered approach that values the reading experience of target language readers is essential. Translators should respect readers' cultural backgrounds, habits, and interests, finding a flexible balance between the original and translated texts to align the translation with the ordinary readers' expectations, thereby promoting the extensive dissemination and profound influence of Chinese culture internationally.

Funding: The research was funded by the University-Industry Collaborative Education Program (Project No. 230801549171833). This research was also funded by the Special Project on Foreign Language Studies of Guangxi Philosophy and Social Science Research (Project No. 23WYL009) and the Innovation Project of Guangxi Graduate Education (Project No. JGY2022291; YCSW2024542)

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References:

- [1] Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* [M]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- [2] Iser Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* [M]. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- [3] Chen Rong. "Research on Translation Strategies for Corporate Blockchain White Papers from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics" [J]. *Jiangsu Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2021(01): 64-66.
- [4] Chen Wenhui. "An Overview of Reception Aesthetics and Translation Studies in China" [J]. *Journal of Kunming University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2018, 18(01): 90-98.
- [5] Hu Zuoyou, Liu Mengjie. "Translation Violence and Chinese Culture Going Global" [J]. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, 2023, 44(01): 193-199.
- [6] Li Guangwei, Yue Feng. "Diachronic Investigation of the Status Quo, Problems and Prospects of English Translation and Dissemination of Shijing at Home and Abroad" [J]. *Journal of University of South China (Social Science Edition)*, 2019, 20(04): 100-106.
- [7] Ma Zuyi, Ren Rongzhen. *History of World's Translation of Chinese Writing* [M]. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press, 2003.
- [8] She Dan, Jiang Xiao. "A Study on the English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture in *Dream of the Red Chamber* from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics" [J]. *Journal of Jiamusi Vocational Institute*, 2021, 37(08): 87-88.
- [9] Wang Hong. "The Book of Songs and Its English Translation" [J]. *East Journal of Translation*, 2012(6): 50-57.
- [10] Wang Rongpei, Wang Hong. *English Translations of Chinese Classics* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2009.
- [11] Xu Yuanchong. *Exploration of Chinese Poetry in English Rhyme* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1992.
- [12] Yue Feng. "Translation and Cultural Image: Studies on the Dissemination of Confucian Classics in the West" [M]. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 2006.
- [13] Zha Mingjian. "Comparative Literature and Sino-Foreign Cultural Exchanges" [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2018, (4).