

# Analysis of Two English Translations of Jinling Prophecies based on Functional Equivalence Theory

**Tieying Gong** 

Business English, School of International Studies, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, 100029, China

202109045@uibe.edu.cn

Abstract. The Jinling Prophecies serve as a pivotal element of the outline in *Hongloumeng*, one of the Four Masterpieces of China, foreshadowing the destiny of each protagonist. In the form of poetry, the Jinling Prophecies is condensed and rich in connotation However, there has been few studies on the translation of the Jinling Prophecies despite its pivotal role in *Hongloumeng*. Therefore, this thesis employs the theory of functional equivalence to examine its English translations by Hawkes, D., & Minford, J. (1974) and Yang, H. Y., & Yang, G. (1994) respectively based on their adherence to the original text. By comparing excerpts from the two versions, it is observed that while Hawkes & Minford's translation incurs greater cultural loss, it aligns more closely with functional equivalence theory by prioritizing conveying meaning over form compared with the Yangs' translation.

**Keywords:** Hongloumeng, Jinling Prophecies, Poetry, Functional Equivalence Theory

# 1 Introduction

# 1.1 Research Background

Hongloumeng is one of the Four Famous Classical Books in China. Due to the outstanding literary and artistic value of Hongloumeng, in the past 100 years, the world has translated and published it in 23 languages<sup>5</sup>. This study compares the two translations of Jinling Prophecies of Hongloumeng from the theory of functional equivalence, aiming to evaluate and reflect on their translation quality, with particular attention to the effectiveness of the original text in terms of form and perspective. In addition, the study focuses on the poetic form of Jinling Prophecies to provide new perspectives for understanding the translation of classical Chinese literary works in cross-cultural communication.

# 1.2 A Brief Introduction to *Hongloumeng* and its English Versions

# A Brief Introduction to Hongloumeng.

Hongloumeng is a book of 120 chapters, which describes the rise and fall of an aristocratic family with the tragic love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu as the main line. Cao Xueqin completed the first eighty chapters, and then Gao E continued to complete the work of the last forty chapters. The language of this fiction is distinctive and characterized by a unique style. For example, it incorporates a significant amount of poetry, creating a strong poetic atmosphere; the use of classical Chinese language and literary allusions showcases its cultural richness.

# A Brief Introduction to the English Versions of Hongloumeng.

In book form, there are two English translations of *Hongloumeng*, namely *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes and John Minford (1974)<sup>4</sup>, and *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang (1994)<sup>13</sup>.

Hawkes, a renowned sinologist, possessed a wealth of knowledge in the Chinese language. *The Story of the Stone*, was translated by him for the first eighty chapters and by Minford for the rest of the chapters. It was published by the Penguin Group in the 1970s.

A Dream of Red Mansions was published in three volumes by the China Foreign Languages Press in 2006. Its translators were proficient in both languages and cultures and relied on translation tools to aid in the academic translation work.

The readership for the two translations differs. As mentioned by Li and Zhang (2012)<sup>7</sup>, the Hawkes's version targets foreign audience, focusing on cultural transmission and Chinese culture promotion. As for Yang's version, it is intended for professionals, featuring formal language and exquisite wording that prioritizes conveying the complete values of the Chinese culture as depicted in the original text.

# 2 Literature Review

The studies on *Hongloumeng* and its translations have emerged in the past decades. Kwok, Moratto, and Liu (2024) explored the stylistic differences between the two translated versions based on the hybrid register nature of fiction<sup>6</sup>. Chou and Liu (2024) compared the differences in narration and fictional speech between the two translated versions<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, scholars have also delved into the cultural transmission aspects of the translators. For example, Wang (2024) focused on the translation of the color term in the two versions<sup>12</sup> and Li (2022) compared the translation techniques for vulgar language<sup>8</sup>.

The Jinling Prophecies appeared in the fifth chapter of *Hongloumeng*, which was presented in the form of poetry and was relatively obscure. As the crucial point of the text, it plays a pivotal role in understanding the whole novel. However, few scholars have conducted researches on Jinling Prophecies, and in the existing studies, scholars have few research perspectives. For example, Yu (2022) compared the linguistic features of the two translations of Jinling Prophecies based on the corpus perspective<sup>14</sup>,

while Ma (2013) investigated the unique artistic feature, namely, two songs in one voice by comparing the two English versions<sup>9</sup>.

# **3** Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional equivalence was proposed by Eugene A. Nida (2004)<sup>10</sup>. He (2004) believed that there are two basic types of equivalence in translation: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence<sup>11</sup>. Formal equivalence emphasizes maintaining as much consistency as possible with various forms in the source language, while dynamic equivalence suggests that "content is paramount, form is secondary", requiring translators not to strive for a strict correspondence between the content of the source language and the target language. However, dynamic equivalence seems to neglect formal equivalence. Therefore, the introduction of functional equivalence is to eliminate misunderstandings on dynamic equivalence, requiring translated works to focus on both dynamic equivalence in content and formal equivalence, while considering that the focus should be on the informational content of the translation. Additionally, functional equivalence seeks to achieve equivalence in reader response between the readers of the source language and the target language.

# 4 Compare and Contrast of the Two English Versions of Jinling Prophecies

Jinling Prophecies is the framework of *Hongloumeng*, in the main book, there are prophecies about the Twelve Ladies of Jinling. Compared with English language poetry, it contains Chinese euphemistic emotions, so Jinling Prophecies represent a major difficulty in translation. This thesis mainly analyzes the prophecies of Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, Shi Xiangyun, Jia Yingchun, Wang Xifeng and Li Wan.

# 4.1 Jinling Prophecies of Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai

Table 1. Two Translations of Jinling Prophecies of Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai		
Dl	TT - 1!	<b>X</b> /!

Jinling Prophecies	Hawkes's version	Yang's version
可叹停机德,	One was a pattern of female virtue,	Alas for her wifely virtue,
堪怜咏絮才。	one a wit who made other wits seem slow.	her wit to sing of willow-down, poor maid!
玉带林中挂,	The jade belt in the greenwood hangs,	Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin,
金簪雪里埋。	the gold pin is buried beneath the snow.	and hanging in the wood the belt of jade.

# Translation Difficulties.

The difficulty in translating this prophecy lies in achieving equivalence in terms of allusions, wordplay, and form from the original text.

The use of allusions is evident in the first two lines. "可叹停机德" refers to Xue Baochai. This sentence is adaptd from the story of Le Yangzi's wife, who advised her husband not to sacrifice long-term benefits for short-term gains and urged him to focus on studying diligently. In *Hongloumeng*, Xue Baochai repeatedly urged Jia Baoyu to study for the imperial exams, but Jia Baoyu detested Confucian classics and standardized essays. Therefore, the expression "可叹" is used to express regret for Jia Baoyu's poor learning. "堪怜咏絮才" refers to Lin Daiyu. "咏絮才" was drawn on the story of Xie Daoyun, a talented woman from the Eastern Jin dynasty, who compared snow to willow catkins. In *Hongloumeng* Lin Daiyu also composed verses about willow catkins, praising Lin Daiyu's talent, while "堪怜" expresses Cao Xueqin's compassion for Lin Daiyu.

Wordplay is evident in the last two lines. "玉带林中挂" can be read as Dai Yu when reversed, hinting at her tragic fate; while in "金簪雪里藏", "雪" refers to "Xue" from Xue Baochai, and the Chinese meaning of "金簪" refers to Baochai, suggesting her lonely life after marrying Jia Baoyu.

The translation difficulty also lies in the parallelism form. The first two lines exhibit complete parallelism, as do the last two lines. The fourth line elaborates on the fate of the protagonist mentioned in the first line, while the third line corresponds to the second line.

# Evaluation of the Two English Versions.

Hawkes adopted a free translation of "咏絮才" to prove that this person is smarter than others, which reflects the meaning of the allusion and makes it easier for readers to understand, while Yang adopted a literal translation to mean that a person sings about willows with his wisdom, which retains the imagery of "咏絮" (singing about willows) in classical Chinese poetry. According to Nida's theory of functional equivalence, if the translation of word-for-word equivalence is ambiguous, it should be abandoned, so Hawkes's translation here is more in line with Nida's theory of equivalence.

As for the wordplay, both translations adopt literal translation and do not translate the meaning behind "玉带" and "金簪", but translate them as "jade" and "golden hairpin". The translators all chose not to unveil the mystery of the judgment and better conveyed the content of the original work, reflecting Nida's theory of functional equivalence.

About the form, Guo (2014) mentioned that Hawkes's translation adopts the sentence form of "one....one", so that the reader can know that it is about two people; while in Yang's translation, "her wifely virtue, her wit to..." may lead to the misunderstanding that there is only one person<sup>3</sup>. Functional equivalence theory points out that translators must pay attention to the equivalence of readers' responses, so the Hawkes translation is considered welling reflect the original intention of Nida's theory. Besides, in the translation of the first two sentences, Hawkes's translation is more

effective through the "one...one" syntax, which is more in line with formal equivalence than Yang's translation of "poor maid" and the change of the order of the last two sentences.

# 4.2 Jinling Prophecies of Shi Xiangyun

Jinling Prophecies	Hawkes's version	Yang's version
富贵又何为,	What shall avail you rank and riches,	Nought avail her rank and riches,
襁褓之间父母违;	orphaned while yet in swaddling bands you lay?	while yet in swaddling clothes an orphan lone,
展眼吊斜晖,	Soon you must mourn your bright sun's early setting.	in a flash she mourns the setting sun,
湘江水逝楚云飞。	The Xiang flows and the Chu	the river Xiang runs dry, the

Table 2. Two Translations of Jinling Prophecies of Shi Xiangyun

#### Translation Difficulties.

The translation difficulties of this prophecy are the equivalence of words and allusions.

In terms of words, the whole expression conveys the feeling of the passing of time. The word "展眼" has the feeling of regret, and "斜辉" expresses the meaning of time flying by; "湘江" and "楚云" allude to Shi Xiangyun, and "水逝" and "云飞" also express the sense that time passes easily.

In response to allusion, "湘江" is the place where E Huang and Nu Ying cried for Shun, and "楚云" is derived from the fact that the king of Chu dreamed of the Goddess of Wushan, who was able to move clouds and make rain in Song Yu's *Gao Tang Fu*, which both indicate that Shi Xiangyun's life was full of pain and helplessness.

# Evaluation of the Two English Versions.

For words and diction, both translations of the third sentence accredit "content is the most important, form comes second" in Nida's theory of functional equivalence. Instead of using literal translation to translate "展眼" as "look around", it is literally translated as "mourn" to express the feeling of regret; the two translations of the fourth sentence used literal translation to depict the imagery of the original text, taking into account the reader's equivalent feeling. I believe that there is no contradiction in adopting the literal translation and then the free translation. Because the free translation is used first to lay down the emotional tone for the readers to understand the list of imagery in the fourth sentence, reflecting the form of equivalence.

# 4.3 Jinling Prophecies of Jia Yingchun

Jinling Prophecies	Hawkes's version	Yang's version
子系中山狼,	Paired with a brute like the wolf in the old fable,	For husband she will have a mountain wolf,
得志便猖狂。	who on his saviour turned when he was able.	his object gained he ruth- lessly berated her.
金闺花柳质,	To cruelty not used, your gentle heart,	Fair bloom, sweet willow in a golden bower,
一载赴黄粱。	shall, in a twelvemonth only, break apart.	too soon a rude awakening awaits her.

Table 3. Two Translations of Jinling Prophecies of Jia Yingchun

# Translation Difficulties.

In the translation of this prophecy, there are difficulties in the word-splitting games, allusions, and formal equivalents of the original text.

The word-splitting games can be found found in the first sentence, in which "子系" means "he is", while "子系" can be spelled as "孙", which is the surname of Yingchun's husband, Sun Shaozu.

The allusion is reflected in the first four lines. The phrase "中山狼" comes from *The Legend of the Wolf in Zhongshan*, which told a story of Mr. Dong Guo who saved a wolf in Zhongshan but was almost swallowed by it. The sentence indicated that the Sun family's ingratitude in treating Yingchun badly. "赴黄粱" comes from *Pillow Story*, which is a metaphor for the illusory nature of life, and refers to the meaning of death.

The form is reflected in the rhyme of " 狼", "狂", "梁"; secondly, "金闺花柳质" is the same as "可怜金玉质" in Miaoyu's sentence, which is a metaphor for Yingchun's fragility.

# Evaluation of the Two English Versions.

To address the word-splitting game, both Hawkes and Yang chose not to translate it, failing to fully realize the theory of functional equivalence, and not reaching the equivalence of readers' response. However, from a practical point of view, it is difficult to vividly translate the form and content of a poem.

As for allusions, firstly, Hawkes translated "中山狼" as "the wolf in the old fable", while Yang adopted a literal translation as "a mountain wolf". The disadvantage of the literal translation is that it ignores the fact that not all mountain wolves are cunning and ungrateful. Secondly, for the translation of "赴黄粱", both translators adopted free translation to bring out its essence, which is easy for readers to understand and conforms to functional equivalence.

In terms of form, firstly, both translations emphasize rhyming, in Hawkes's translation, the first and last two lines are in end-rhyme, while in Yang's translation, the second, third, and fourth lines are in end-rhyme, which retains the beauty of the original text as much as possible. Besides, as for the translation of the imagery of "花柳质" in the third line, Hawkes still adopted the free translation of "your gentle heart", which is more convenient to understand but loses the poetic image of the original text, while Yang adopted the literal translation as "sweet willow in a golden bower", which retains the poetic and mysterious sense of the original. In my opinion, Hawkes's translation is more in line with Nida's theory for readers can understand the author's meaning easily, while it may be more difficult for them to understand in the face of Yang's translation. It is slightly more important to choose between poetic meaning and poetic form to achieve the equivalence of readers' response.

# 4.4 Jinling Prophecies of Wang Xifeng

Jinling Prophecies	Hawkes's version	Yang's version
凡鸟偏从末日来,	This phoenix in a bad time came;	This bird appears when the world falls on evil times;
都知爱慕此生才。	all praised her great ability.	none but admires her talents and her skill;
一从二令三人木,	Two makes my riddle with a man and tree;	first she complies, then commands, then is dismissed,
哭向金陵事更哀。	returning south in tears she met calamity.	departing in tears to Jinling more wretched still.

Table 4. Two Translations of Jinling Prophecies of Wang Xifeng

#### Translation Difficulties.

The difficulties of Wang Xifeng's prophecy are in the word-splitting games and allusion.

The word-splitting games lie in the first and third sentences. In the first sentence, "凡鸟" is "鳳", which is the traditional form of "phoenix"; in the third sentence, "人木" is "休", and Mr. Wu Enyu said, "Wang Xifeng was at first obedient to Jia Lian, and then she could give orders to Jia Lian, but in the end, she had no other choice but to face the fate of divorce."

The allusion is reflected in the first sentence. "凡卓" is used in *Shishuo Xinyu*, reflecting Wang Xifeng's distinction and talent.

# Evaluation of the Two English Versions.

Hawkes translated the third sentence as "two makes my riddle with a man and tree", which is a literal translation of "man" and "tree", making it difficult to understand the meaning of the original text. However, in Yang's translation, according to

Mr. Wu Enyu's explanation, it was translated as "first she complies, then commands, then is dismissed", which is a free translation. I think that Yang's translation is more suitable. Nida believed that if the meaning of the original text is misinterpreted, the literal meaning of the words should be discarded; although the cultural flavor of the game of dismantling the words is lost here, free translation is necessary to facilitate the readers' comprehension.

For the allusion, Hawkes's translation shows off free translation, translating the word "凡學" as "phoenix", while Yang's translation represents its literally meaning as "this bird". I believe that it is better to use the free translation here so that the readers of the foreign language can have the same feeling as the readers of the original language.

# 4.5 Jinling Prophecies of Li Wan

Jinling Prophecies	Hawkes's version	Yang's version
桃李春风结子完,	The plum-tree bore her fruit after the rest,	Peach and plum in spring winds finish seeding.
到头谁似一盆兰。	yet, when all's down, her Orchid was the best.	Who can bloom like the orchid at last?
如冰水好空相妒,	Against your ice-pure nature all in vain	Pure as ice and water she arouses envy,
枉与他人作笑谈。	the tongues of envy wagged; you felt no pain.	vain the groundless taunts that are cast.

**Table 5.** Two Translations of Jinling Prophecies of Li Wan

# Translation Difficulties.

The translation difficulties of this prophecy are mainly homophonic pun and metaphor.

Homophonic pun is reflected in the first two sentences. The word "完" harmonizes with "纨", which means Li Wan. "结子完" means that the flowers of peach and plum have given birth to a child, implying that after Li Wan gave birth to a child, her husband died and her happiness also faded away. "兰" refers to Li Wan's son, Jia Lan, who was educated by Li Wan, and eventually died at an early age, but was the most promising descendant of the Jia family, which was mentioned by Chen (2022)¹.

The metaphor is reflected in the third sentence. "如冰水好" means as clean and pure as ice and dew. Li Wan is compared to ice water, showing that after her husband's death, she abided by the ways of women, and her character was noble and beautiful.

# Evaluation of the Two English Versions.

In response to the homophonic pun, both translations show literal translation, without translating "完" and "兰" with their implied perspectives. The word-for-word

equivalence has been made on the premise that there is no ambiguity or comprehension problem in the original text, which makes up for the untranslatability of the Chinese text with the loss of more cultural elements.

For the metaphor, both translations represent free translation, using "pure" to point out the meaning of purity. They make up for the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, emphasize the content of the text, facilitate the readers' understanding of the image of Li Wan, and reflect the functional equivalence.

# 5 Conclusion

# 5.1 Major Findings

This study uses the theory of functional equivalence to analyze the translation of Jinling Prophecies in *Hongloumeng*. Through a comparative study of five examples from Hawkes's version and Yang's version, it is evident that Hawkes targets foreign general audiences, aiming to spread Chinese culture. Therefore, Hawkes's translations exhibit more free translation, being more flexible compared to Yang's translation. On the other hand, Yang's target audience is professional Chinese readers, and his purpose is to develop academic research. Hence, Yang's translation tends to lean towards literal expression, allowing foreign language readers to engage with Cao Xueqin's thoughts in a similar manner to readers of the original language.

From my point of view, Hawkes's translations align more closely with the theory of functional equivalence. Despite exhibiting a more significant cultural loss phenomenon compared to Yang's translation, based on the theory of functional equivalence, the focus of translation is on the content of information, with the form being secondary. Hawkes's translations target foreign readers, prioritizing conveying meaning in word choice and sentence structure, with the form being secondary. This emphasis ensures an equivalent reaction between readers of the source language and the target language in understanding the author's thoughts.

# 5.2 Suggestions for Future Studies

For future research, it is recommended to diversify the study objects by selecting additional excerpts or chapters from *Hongloumeng* for analysis. Conducting empirical studies to collect and analyze reader feedback can provide a more objective evaluation of translation effects. Furthermore, expanding research to include cross-cultural comparisons can offer insights into the impact of cultural factors on translation strategies. These directions aim to deepen understanding of translators' styles and the application of functional equivalence theory in translation studies.

Hongloumeng itself is difficult to translate, and the translation of the ingenious Jinling Prophecies is even more daunting. Although the "untranslatability" of literary works makes it difficult to avoid regret in translation, it is precisely for this reason that culture retains its unique charm and attracts more readers to unveil it under the guidance of translators.

# Reference

ge=CHS

- 1. Chen, H. H. (2022). A brief analysis of the person in "Dream of the Red Mansion" Jia Lan. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 226-229.
- 2. Chou, I., & Liu, K. (2024). Style in speech and narration of two English translations of Hongloumeng: A corpus-based multidimensional study. *Target International Journal of Translation Studies*, 36, 76-111. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.22020.cho
- Guo, X. (2014). A comparative study on the translation of Jinling prophecies in three English versions of Hongloumeng-from the perspective of functional equivalence theory (Master's thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=f2Ae6OvU-JKVKX5Bg2BuO1TjwYjwd4Ay xaml7kEmP0hy6ioGa4obSY-wFe9luzxr5Effszts4NKQZOre3N-LgEW-AudUHOudhBhIr m5uRHI6DKyb21sv7LjATJSsZBKOK0\_66InVcQo=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=C HS
- 4. Hawkes, D., & Minford, J. (1974). The Story of the Stone. London: Penguin Books Press.
- 5. He, M. X., & He, S. Y. (2016). "Hongloumeng" red hot overseas is not a dream. *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, 07, Chinese literature.
- 6. Kwok, H. L., Moratto, R., & Liu, K. (2024). Activity versus Descriptivity: A Stylometric Analysis of Two English Translations of Hongloumeng. *Glottometrics*, 56.
- Li, Q. M., & Zhang, X. (2012). The translator's adaptation and selection: Interpretation of the Yang and Hawkes translations of "Hongloumeng." *Modern Communication*, (07), 64-65.
- 8. Li, D. (2022). A comparative study on the translation of vulgar language in two English versions of Hongloumeng with sublimation theory (Master's thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=f2Ae6OvU-JKQ6JtWpaX6wVoTihFLNRBw ZvvR7erTf7YfLsNoP2Y1ePGQaN1HOLmM\_FpTxSYeFzRZPTHku0DKsSFQH3TaRB-yamH\_\_5IsPDOKvewugttj4PRQ113MqTkilz6VlcgURcs=&uniplatform=NZKPT&langua
- 9. Ma, X. (2013). On the transformation of the unique artistic feature taking two English versions of Panci in Hongloumeng as a case. *Journal of Jiangxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (05), 140-144.
- Nida, E. A. (2004). The Theory and Practice of Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- 11. Nida, E. A. (2004). *Toward A Science of Translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- 12. Wang, R. (2024). A contrastive study on the translation of color term "Qing" in two English versions of a Dream of Red Mansions from conceptual metaphor theory (Master's thesis, Guizhou Normal University). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=f2Ae6OvU-JLaHPuofArZdl9ucJjET2N2dYD Rzvwjxa4IEJPVwHA1qapHtq-5-pOWhBFBLizbCXaVEByuN7t8rcOozFQPxUIo27FHOr PzfY0QD3luGSGUZpu-YJ214L14-2EK1jIUskw=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- Yang, H. Y., & Yang, G. (1994). A Dream of Red Mansions. Beijing: Foreign Language Press
- 14. Yu, H.(2022). A Corpus-Based Comparison of Linguistic Features of Yang's and Hawks' English Version of Pan Ci in A Dream of Red Mansions. Journal of Sichuan Minzu College, (04),99-103. doi:10.13934/j.cnki.cn51-1729/g4.2022.04.014.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

