

# A Case Study on Translation of Artistic Conception in Classical Chinese Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** According to Reception Aesthetics, a literary work is always written for readers to read. Only in the reading process can a literary work be transferred into a real existence. As a matter of fact, in the reading process the potential readers play a key role in guiding the writers' creation and the translators' reproduction as they have their own horizon of expectations. The author of this thesis tries to illustrate the great power that Reception Aesthetics produces in guiding different translators to reproduce the artistic conception of the original poem, Wang Wei's *farewell*.

**KEYWORD:** Reception Aesthetics; horizon of expectations; artistic conception; classical Chinese poems (CCP); *farewell*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Different from the modern literary works, Classical Chinese poems are very concise, which require translators to build a bridge between two different languages, cultures and readers. There are so many beauties in CCP, of which the author thinks the beauty in artistic conception is the most important one. According to reader-centered view in Reception Aesthetics, the author will analyze the reproduction of the beauty in artistic conception of Wang Wei's *farewell*.

## 2 ARTISTIC CONCEPTION OF CCP AND RECEPTION AESTHETICS

### 2.1 An overview of Reception Aesthetics

In 1960s, Reception Aesthetics was established in Constance School, Germany, as one of important criticism theories. It eliminates the previous overwhelmingly author-centered and text-centered paradigms in literary theories, stressing the active role of the reader.

Jauss asserts that "The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its readers" (Jauss, 1982:19). According to him, in the reading process, readers fill in the blanks of

meaning and indeterminacy actively and decisively while in the reception process, readers understand the literary work with their particular "horizon of expectations" that refers to the readers' implied aesthetic expectation in the act of reading consistent with their evaluation requirement and capacity comprehensively based on their life experience, interest, cultivation, and values. Another renowned representative of the theory, Iser points out: "The literary work has two poles, which might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic pole is the realization accomplished by the reader." (Iser, 1983: 275) In a word, the union of text and reader brings the literary work into existence.

The term "reader" in Reception Aesthetics enjoys high favor. Iser's "implied reader" not only embodies the function of the potential meaning of the text in advance, but also readers' realization of this potentiality in the reading process. "Virtually, this 'implied reader' is only a possibility that can be accomplished during the reading process by the potential meaning of the literary text personified. Naturally, Iser's 'reader' still has nothing to do with creation, but it associates with the production--- literary text. So, I get an inspiration that a concept of 'reader' should be put forward which associates with

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creation directly, namely ‘potential reader’.” (Zhu Li-yuan, 2004: 268)

## 2.2 Beauty in Artistic Conception of CCP

Artistic Conception, a poetic concept in ancient China, is the theoretical generalization of particular aesthetics law on literature and arts, which is related closely to Chinese traditional way of thinking. Actually, Artistic Conception in CCP is a kind of artistic state, which is out of perfect blending of the poet’s feeling and scenery he / she described. For example, the poem *Snow on the River* by Liu Zongyuan, “千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭。孤舟蓑笠翁，独钓寒江雪。” Through the images “hundreds of mountains”, “thousands of trails”, “a solitary boat”, “a bamboo-capped-and-clad old man” and “snow in the cold river,” Liu created an artistic conception of secluded and solitary surroundings. Who can imagine that an old man in straw cape and hat angles alone in a freezing river amid the falling snow? It must be a fantasy world existing in his imagination.

Artistic conception of CCP is so beautiful that a translator should spare no efforts to reproduce it to satisfy the potential readers.

## 3 THE BEAUTY IN ARTISTIC CONCEPTION OF FAREWELL BY WANG WEI AND ITS REPRODUCTION

Prof. Xu Yuan-zhong advocates Three Beauties Theory in translating CCP. Three beauties refer to beauty in sound, beauty in meaning and beauty in form. Prof. Xu points out beauty in meaning comes first in translating CCP into English, beauty in sound the second and beauty in form the third. He also stresses that a translator should first convey the original poem’s meaning, which is accepted by the author of this thesis. According to the author, a translator should foremost reproduce the beauty in artistic conception of the original.

For example:

送别

王维

下马饮君酒，问君何所之。

君言不得意，归卧南山陲。

但去莫复问，白云无尽时。

### Version 1:

*Dismounting, I invite you to drink wine;  
Where are you leaving for? Is there a place fine?  
Unheeded by the world, home you'll your way;*

*To lie down at Zhongnan Mountain's foot, you say.  
No more questions I'll put but bid you good-bye;  
The endless clouds are waiting for you on high.*

(Tr. Xu Yuan-zhong)

### Version 2:

#### *Farewell*

*Dismounting, I asked you to have a draught,  
“And where to, my friend?” I inquired.  
“My hopes are shattered,” you bitterly laughed,  
“To the southern hills, I'm retired.”  
“Then go ahead, say no more, my dear.  
The fleecy clouds have endless cheer.”*

(Tr. Wang Bao-tong)

### Version 3:

#### *GOOD BYE TO MENG HAO-JAN*

*Dismounted, o'er wine we had said our last say;  
Then I whisper, “Dear friend, tell me whither  
away.”  
“Alas!” he replied, “I am sick of life's ills  
“And I long for repose on the slumbering hills.  
But oh seek not to pierce where my footsteps may  
stray.  
“The white clouds will soothe me for ever and ay.”*

(Tr. Herbert A. Giles)

### Version 4:

#### *Farewell*

*Off the horse backs, we drink wine together.  
What fine place are you going to, dear?  
Disillusioned with the mortal world, you'll go away  
To live at the foot of Zhongnan Mountain day after  
day.  
Having no more questions, I bid farewell here;  
The endless fleecy clouds are awaiting you there.*

(Tr. the author)

This is a send-off poem. It is not an ordinary send-off, as the poet’s friend will lead the life of a recluse in the mountains. It appears to be of little literary grace, but one can enjoy unbounded significance after thinking over the last line. The poet must have much to talk when the friend is determined to be a recluse, but he utters only “白云无尽时”，leaving the readers thinking hard. The poet talks like this because he won’t cut to the heart of the friend any more, as his friend is “不得意”，that is, unheeded by the world. The poet understands the friend well. There is no need for him to ask more questions. At the moment, mixed feelings in his heart, the poet feels great sympathy for the friend. In the poem, the first five lines are for sending off, but the last line is for description of scenery, which is too abrupt. As a translator, one should take into

consideration the cultural differences between East and West. So employment of some hints is a good choice, through which coherence comes into being.

In Version 1, the translator gives a hint, employing “waiting for you”, through which feeling and setting is happily blended in the poem. No doubt it is a perfect translation here.

According to the author, the only fly in the ointment is the translation of “终卧” using “to lie down”. Although Wang Wei’s friend is determined to live there until he dies, here “to lie down” always gives the readers the impression that Wang’s friend will lie down at Zhongnan Mountain’s foot as soon as he arrives there. The author thinks that “to lie down” should be replaced by “**to settle down**” or “**to live**”. In the author’s version (Version 4), “**to live**” is employed.

In Version 2, Prof. Wang imitates the original, employing colloquial style. He also gives a hint using “cheer”, vividly reproducing the artistic conception. “The fleecy clouds” makes the image more concrete. Probably, the word “fleecy” will make the potential readers feel familiar with it. In the author’s opinion, “To the southern hills, I’m retired.” needs to be improved. “I’m retired ” had better be replaced by “I’m tired ” to express “得意” though there is “bitterly laughed” in the preceding line.

In Version 3, Herbert A. Giles also imitates the original poem, employing colloquial style. He also employs a hint, using “soothe me for ever” to express “无近时”. The author thinks it is indeed a good translation which is very difficult to surpass. For the title, the author thinks that the person should be “MENG HAO-RAN”.

In Version 4, the author also gives a hint, employing “awaiting you”, through which feeling and setting is happily blended in the poem.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Reception Aesthetics provides a new perspective for our cognition of CCP translation, which helps us have a better understanding of an active role a translator plays in the complex translating process. Virtually, there are no perfect translated versions of classical Chinese poems. The author thinks reproduction of beauty in artistic conception of CCP comes first. In translating process, to reproduce the beauty in artistic conception of CCP a translator should well deal with the cultural elements and indeterminacies, which require the translators to fully understand the original and offer a wonderful interpretation to satisfy the potential readers’ horizon of expectations.

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