

A Study of the Three English Translations of Shen Congwen's *Border Town* Based on Reiss's Translation Criticism Model

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Abstract: To promote the global dissemination of Chinese culture, the translation of Chinese classic literature has garnered widespread attention in the translation field. Literary translation criticism plays an essential role in the development of translation endeavors. This paper will analyze three versions of English translations of Shen Congwen's novella *Border Town* using Reiss's translation criticism model and summarize their performance in terms of formal equivalence and aesthetic effect, linguistic components, and extra-linguistic components.

Keywords: Reiss's translation criticism model; Translation criticism; Translation

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1. Introduction

With China's growing influence in the international community and the accelerated pace of Chinese culture "going global," the translation of Chinese literature has attracted widespread attention. According to the China International Cultural Trade Development Report (2023), the volume of book copyright exports increased from 5,922 items in 2011 to 11,795 items in 2021. Although China's book copyright trade remained in deficit from 2011 to 2021, the import-export ratio narrowed from 2.48:1 to 1.02:1, reflecting a positive reception in overseas markets and renewed vitality for Chinese-themed books^[1]. During this period, literary translation has undertaken the important mission of disseminating Chinese history, culture, national image, and values. Literary translation criticism further improves translation quality and promotes the healthy development of literary translation. Therefore, conducting translation criticism of Chinese classic literature holds profound significance.

2. Origins of the study

Shen Congwen's novella *Border Town*^[2] represents the pinnacle of the pastoral tradition in modern Chinese literature, consolidating, developing, and deepening the lyrical mode of rural life. Following Lu Xun's *The True*

Story of Ah Q, it reshaped the image of China. The pastoral attributes of *Border Town* and its portrayal of China are intertwined, offering a classic template and sentiment for late-developing nations responding to passive modernization. Further analysis reveals that *Border Town*, as a literary refinement of cultural conservatism since the modern era, contains profound flaws and issues such as the appropriation of foreign cultural resources. This exposes the fictional and strategic nature of the dominant ethnic group's self-imagination and its connection to the exotic imagination in Western literature ^[3].

To date, *Border Town* has four English translations, produced by translators from China, the UK, and the US, with a publication span of 73 years—a remarkable phenomenon in the history of modern Chinese literature translation. The first translation, *Emerald* (literally *Cuicui*), was jointly translated by American writer and translator Emily Hahn (1905–1997) and modern Chinese poet, writer, publisher, and translator Shao Xunmei (1906–1968, pen name Shing Mo-Lei). It was serialized in *Tien Hsia Monthly*. The second translation, *The Frontier City*, was co-translated by Chinese translator Ching Ti and British writer and translator Robert Payne, published in 1947 by George Allen & Unwin in London and reprinted in 1982 by Columbia University Press. The third translation, *The Border Town*, was translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, first published in Chinese Literature and later included in Gladys Yang's 1981 collection *The Border Town and Other Stories*, part of the “Panda Books” series by the Chinese Literature Magazine Press. The fourth translation, also titled *The Border Town*, was translated by American sinologist Jeffrey Kinkley and published in 2009 by HarperCollins. These four translations span 73 years, witnessing the history of modern Chinese literature in English.

Since the publication of the first translation in 1936, domestic research on *Border Town* translations has flourished. Studies fall into two main categories:

(1) Analysis of *Border Town* translations from specific theoretical perspectives, e.g., Liu ^[4] explored Gladys Yang's artistic representation of aesthetic elements in *Border Town* from the perspective of translation aesthetics; Wang and Jiang ^[5] analyzed Jeffrey Kinkley's thick translation strategy using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital; (2) Comparative studies of different translations, e.g., Wang and Xie examined the influence of translators' native-language pragmatic orientations on translation based on the four translations; Peng and Wan ^[6] compared three translations using corpus methods to reveal stylistic features.

However, few studies focus on comparative analysis of the translations from textual and linguistic perspectives. Given the distinct translator styles and the significant time span, there is room for broader and deeper research to fully leverage the role of literary translation criticism in promoting cultural exchange.

3. Case studies

3.1. Formal and aesthetic equivalence

As an expressive text, *Border Town*'s translations are first evaluated for formal and aesthetic equivalence.

Example 1

ST: “是谁人？”

“是翠翠！”

“翠翠又是谁？”

“是碧溪岨撑渡船的孙女。”

“你在这儿做什么？”

“我等我爷爷。我等他来。”

“等他来他可不会来，你爷爷一定到城里军营里喝了酒，醉倒后被人抬回去了！”

“他不会这样子。他答应来找我，他就一定会来的。”

“这里等也不成。到我家里去，到那边点了灯的楼上去，等爷爷来找你好不好？”

“悖时砍脑壳的！”

杨译：“Who are you?”

“Emerald.”

“Who’s Emerald?”

“My grandad’s ferryman at the Green Stream.”

“This is no ferry. What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for grandad. He’s going to take me home.”

“He can’t be coming. Must have gone to the barracks to have a drink, got drunk and been carried home.”

“My grandad’s not like that. He said he’d come, he will.”

“Well, don’t wait here. Come to my house—that one with the lamps—and wait for him there.”

“To hell with this hooligan!”

隄译：“Who are you?”

“I’m Green Jade.”

“And who is Green Jade?”

“The granddaughter of the old ferryman at Blue Stream Hills.”

“Well, what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my grandfather. I must wait for him.”

“You must wait for him, eh? But where is he? Must have been drinking, and they carried him home.”

“Not true. He said he was coming, and he will!”

“You can’t wait for him here. Go up to my house. Over there where the lamps are lit. Why not wait for your grandfather there?”

“You swine! You ought to be beheaded!”

金译：“Who are you?”

“CuiCui.”

“And who might that be?”

“The granddaughter of the ferryman at Bixiju, Green Creek Hill.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my grandpa. He’s coming to get me.”

“It doesn’t look like he’s coming. Your grandfather must have gone into town for a drink at the army barracks. I’ll bet he passed out and someone carried him home!”

“He wouldn’t do any such thing. He said he’d come get me, so that’s what he’ll do.”

“This is no place to wait for him. Come up to my house, over there where the lamps are lit. You can wait for him there. How about that?”

“Damned low-life! You’re headed for the executioner!”

Yang uses short dialogues, retains the original’s rhythm. Translates “悖时砍脑壳” as “To hell with this hooligan!” conveying the rustic tone. Ti similarly concise but translates the phrase as “You swine! You ought to be beheaded!” losing some colloquial nuance. Kinkley renders it as “Damned low-life! You’re headed for the executioner!” capturing the emotional intensity. All three versions achieve formal equivalence, but Yang’s translation excels in aesthetic effect.

3.2. Linguistic components

According to Reiss's translation criticism theory, linguistic elements comprise three dimensions: semantic, lexical, and stylistic, each governed by specific evaluative criteria.

3.2.1. Semantics

According to Reiss's translation criticism theory, linguistic elements encompass three dimensions: semantics, vocabulary, and style, each governed by specific criteria. At the semantic level, failures to recognize polysemous words and homonyms, inconsistencies between source and target terms, as well as misinterpretations, arbitrary additions, or omissions, constitute the most significant risks for translators. To ensure semantic equivalence, it is imperative to examine these elements within their linguistic context^[6].

Example 2

ST: “嗨嗨，你这个喽啰！要你到我家喝一杯也不成，还怕酒里有毒，把你这个真命天子毒死！”

杨译：“Hey, there, outlaw! You wouldn't come in and have a drink with me. Afraid I'd poison a big man like you, eh?”

隄译：“Hey, you! You wouldn't come to have a drink in my house, you remember? You were afraid I might poison the wine, eh? And you're such an important old fellow—a future Emperor, most likely?”

金译：“Hey, there, you old highwayman, I asked you to stay for a drink but you wouldn't stay put! Were you afraid of poison? Did you think I dared to slay a true-born Son of Heaven?”

Yang's translation of “Outlaw” and “a big man like you” accurately conveys the playful tone. Ti's translation of “You” and “a future Emperor” misinterprets the latter term. Kinkley's translation of “Highwayman” fits, but “true-born Son of Heaven” is overly literal. Yang's translation best achieves semantic equivalence.

3.2.2. Vocabulary

From the lexical perspective, the criterion for assessing vocabulary elements is adequacy, which necessitates determining whether the components of the source text have been fully conveyed at the lexical level in the target language. This involves evaluating the translator's effectiveness in handling specialized terms and unique expressions, such as “false friends,” homonyms, untranslatable words, proper nouns, metaphors, wordplay, idiomatic phrases, and proverbs^[7].

Example 3

ST: 那翠翠却傍花轿站定，去欣赏每一个人的脸色与花轿上的流苏。

杨译：.....get the first possible glimpse of the bridal sedan-chair.

隄译：..... while Green Jade settled up close to the bridal chair, gazing intently at the chair and the embroidered decorations.

金译：..... while Cuicui stood by the ornately decorated bridal sedan chair, taking note of all the faces in the procession and the tassels on the palanquin.

Yang translated “花轿” to “Bridal sedan-chair,” capturing the function but missing decorative details. While Ti's “Bridal chair” is ambiguous. Kinkley translated it as “Ornately decorated bridal sedan chair” and “palanquin,” fully conveying the richness. Kinkley's version is the most adequate.

3.2.3. Style

From a stylistic perspective, it is essential to determine whether the target text demonstrates complete “correspondence,” whether the translation adequately accounts for distinctions between colloquial and standard/

formal usage in the source text, and whether the author's creative expressions deviate from conventional language usage in terms of specific stylistic features^[7].

Example 4

ST: “白鸡关出老虎咬人，不咬别人，团总的小姐派第一……大姐戴副金簪子，二姐戴副银钏子，只有我三妹没得什么戴，耳朵上长年戴条豆芽菜”。

杨译: The tiger eats the captain's daughter first;
Most girls have gold and silver for their hair;
Poor Emerald is the one who comes off worst—

No trinkets, nothing but bean-sprouts to wear!

隄译: “There comes the Tiger from the White Cock Pass,
And he will only bite the Chieftain's daughter.

My eldest sister has a gold pin in her hair,

My second sister has silver bracelets on her wrists,

But I, the third maiden, have nothing to wear.

But a bean-sprout behind my ears all the year round...”

金译: The tiger at White Rooster Pass feasts on people
And he'll get the militia captain's daughter first.

Sister No. 1 wears a pair of gold hairpins,

Sister No. 2, a pair of silver bracelets,

But Sister No. 3, little me, has no jewelry to be found.

Just bean-sprout earrings, worn all the year round.

This part is a folk rhyme sung by Cuicui. Yang uses rhyme (“first”/ “worst,” “hair”/ “wear”), enhancing the humorous tone. Ti's translation lacks rhyme, weakening the stylistic effect. Kinkley rhymes (“people”/ “first,” “found”/ “round”), retaining the playful style. Yang and Kinkley best replicate the original style.

3.3. Extra-linguistic components

According to Reiss's translation criticism model, upon completing the analysis of linguistic elements, the evaluation proceeds to examine the three translated versions of *Border Town* through the lens of extra-linguistic factors. While Reiss's framework encompasses seven dimensions—immediate situation, theme, temporal context, geographical setting, addresser, and addressee, as well as affective connotations—this study focuses specifically on four key aspects most pertinent to *Border Town* and its translations: immediate situation, theme, target readership (receiver), and affective connotations.

3.3.1. Immediate situation

The immediate situation refers to the contextual background of narrative events. While authors may omit certain details for conciseness, relying on source-language readers' cultural knowledge to fill these gaps, target-language readers often lack such contextual understanding. Consequently, to achieve semantic equivalence, translators must adopt an empathetic stance toward the source text, accurately comprehending the contextualized meaning within the specific situational framework^[7].

Example 5

ST: 我们应当说一是一，不许三心二意。

杨译: A Chatong girl should stick to her word. None of this shilly-shallying!

隄译 : You ought to keep your words and not have “three hearts and two minds.”

金译 : We stick to our promises, we don't give into second thoughts.

The phrase “说一是一” means stick to one's word, and “三心二意” means indecisive. Yang translated it to “Stick to her word” and “shilly-shallying” fit the context. Ti's translation, “three hearts and two minds,” is confusing. Kinkley's “Second thoughts” alters the emotional tone. Yang's translation best preserves the context.

3.3.2. Theme

Example 6

ST: 为了住处两山多篁竹, 翠色逼人而来, 老船夫随便为这可怜的孤雏拾取了一个近身的名字, 叫做“翠翠”。

杨译 : Because their home was among bamboos and hills of a glorious emerald green, the old boatman gave the poor mite the name Emerald.

隄译 : The cottage lay between hills covered thickly with bamboo groves, whose jade-green leaves filled the eyes with interminable bright color, and so he called her “Green Jade.”

金译 ; Because of the compelling deep, emerald green of bamboo stands covering the mountains on either side by the stream where they lived, the old ferryman, without a second thought, named the girl after what was close at hand: Cuicui, or “Jade Green.”

Yang's translation of “Emerald” loses the rustic charm. Ti's “Green Jade” is culturally distant. Kinkley's “Cuicui” retains the phonetic and cultural essence. Kinkley's version aligns best with the pastoral theme.

3.3.3. Receiver

The concept of the receiver refers to the target-text reader's capacity to comprehend and engage with the translated material, serving as a crucial quality assessment parameter. When handling culture-specific elements in the source text, translators must ensure the target audience can effectively interpret the text within their own cultural framework. Particularly for culture-bound imagery, critics must examine whether translators have successfully transposed the mental representations shared by source-language readers into the conceptual world of target-language readers^[7].

Example 7

ST: “老伯伯, 你翠翠长得真标致, 像个观音样子。”

杨译 : “Uncle, your Emerald's grown into a fine girl, a regular Guan Yin. * [Notes]*: The Goddess of Mercy.

隄译 : “Old uncle, you know---Green Jade is very attractive.”

金译 : “Elder Uncle, your Cuicui has grown quite beautiful. She's a real Guan Yin. * [Notes]*:

“观音” was the goddess of mercy, a beauty in Buddhist iconography, also known as Bodhisattva Guanshiyin, a name of a Buddhist Bodhisattva. It is the transliteration of the Sanskrit word Avalokiteśvara, and later evolved into an image of compassion and kindness. Yang adds a footnote for cultural explanation. Ti simplifies to “attractive,” losing cultural depth. Kinkley provides detailed notes, enhancing understanding. Kinkley's approach is most reader-friendly.

3.3.4. Affective connotations

Affective connotations primarily influence lexical and stylistic decisions in translation, as every text carries distinct emotional values that are typically manifested through various rhetorical devices including humor,

irony, derision, sarcasm, exhilaration, emphasis, and other expressive modalities. Translation critics must systematically evaluate whether these nuanced affective elements have been adequately preserved and effectively reconstituted in the target text.

Example 8

ST: “爷爷，你疯了！再说我就生你的气！”“谁也不稀罕那只鸭子！”

杨译：“Are you out of your mind, granddad? Don’t talk such nonsense!”“Who wants their duck?”

隄译：“You’re stupid, grandfather. I do think you are stupid! I’ll be as angry as anything if you ever say another word!”“Who cares for the drakes?”

金译：“Grandfather, you’re crazy! Keep on like this and I’ll get angry!”“Who wants that old duck?”

This sentence implies Cuicui’s playful anger. Yang’s translation of “Out of your mind” is too strong. Ti’s translation “Stupid” captures the tone well. Kinkley’s translation “Crazy” fits the context. Ti and Kinkley convey the emotion more accurately.

4. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the comparative assessment of the three translations across formal equivalence, aesthetic equivalence, linguistic elements, and extra-linguistic factors yields the following conclusions: First of all, all three translations substantially achieve formal equivalence with minimal variance. Yang-Gladys’ version demonstrates superior bicultural competence, achieving the highest aesthetic resonance; Kinkley’s translation exhibits deeper sinological insights into Shen Congwen’s oeuvre, ranking second aesthetically; Ti-Payne’s version shows relatively weaker aesthetic performance. Secondly, Yang-Gladys and Kinkley versions excel in semantic, lexical, and stylistic dimensions; Ti-Payne translation trails in linguistic precision. Thirdly, Kinkley’s version demonstrates optimal cultural transposition, while Yang-Gladys and Ti-Payne versions follow respectively.

This comprehensive assessment demonstrates how Reiss’s theoretically robust yet flexible framework enables nuanced evaluation of multiple translation versions while acknowledging the model’s evolving nature in contemporary translation studies.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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