

# Aesthetic Representation in *Dragonfly Eyes* from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

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## Abstract

Children's literature carries abundant aesthetic information to convey the perception of beauty to children. In the translation of children's literature, special attention should be paid to the aesthetic representation of the source text to avoid the loss of beauty. Adopting the text analysis method, this paper takes the Chinese and English versions of Cao Wenxuan's children's literary work *Dragonfly Eyes* as the corpus, generalizes the aesthetic information sets from the perspective of Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics, and analyzes how the translator achieves aesthetic representation. Through a comparative analysis, it is found that on the basis of faithfulness to the source text, the translator imitated and rewrote the original information, basically preserving the aesthetic information contained therein.

## Keywords

**Dragonfly Eyes; translation of children's literature; translation aesthetics; aesthetic representation.**

## 1. Introduction

Children's literature contains aesthetic characteristics due to its special attributes and is an important object of aesthetic research. Cao Wenxuan's children's literature is renowned for its "pure beauty", whose beauty is reflected not only in language but also in emotions, thus possessing profound aesthetic value. Translation aesthetics refers to the aesthetic process of identifying, understanding and representing the aesthetic information of the source text in translation, and it is a dual exploration of the aesthetic information of both the source text and the target text. Based on the relevant theories of translation aesthetics proposed by Professor Liu Miqing, this paper conducts an exploration of the aesthetic information in the source text of Cao Wenxuan's *Dragonfly Eyes* from both the systematic and non-systematic perspectives, and meanwhile analyzes how the translator realizes aesthetic representation in the translation process. This analysis not only explores the beauty of the source text but also provides references for the English translation of Chinese children's literature, promoting the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature and conveying the beauty of Chinese children's literature to the world.

Cao Wenxuan is a renowned contemporary Chinese children's literature writer. The world depicted in his works is full of childlike fun and profound insights into life. His "pure beauty" novel series, including *The Straw House*, *Bronze and Sunflower*, *Goats Do Not Eat Heaven Grass* and *Gen Niao*, enjoys a high reputation in China, and their translated versions are also deeply loved by international readers. In 2017, Cao Wenxuan won the Hans Christian Andersen Award for *Bronze and Sunflower*, becoming the first Chinese writer to receive this honor, after which his works attracted great attention overseas. Following this award, Cao Wenxuan published his new work *Dragonfly Eyes*, which tells the story of three generations of a family spanning fifty years. With the growth of Ah Mei as the main narrative thread, the novel outlines the touching

scene of the family supporting and comforting each other in that special era from the child's perspective. The language in the book is simple and unadorned yet full of warmth, conveying complex emotions through simple words. The English version of *Dragonfly Eyes* was published in 2021, translated by Helen Wang, a British sinologist who also translated *Bronze and Sunflower*, and was named a Honor Book of the The Batchelder Award in 2023, becoming the first Chinese children's novel to win this award since its inception.

## 2. Research on Cao Wenxuan's Works

At present, research on the English translation of Cao Wenxuan's works is scarce, and most of them focus on the translated version of *Bronze and Sunflower*. Relevant research on this work mainly concentrates on the following aspects. Firstly, research on the translation and dissemination of *Bronze and Sunflower*. Dong Haiya explored the content, subjects, audiences, approaches and effects of the translation and dissemination of *Bronze and Sunflower*, analyzed the various influencing factors of its overseas success, and provided enlightenment for the international translation and dissemination of Chinese children's literature[1]. Secondly, micro-level English-Chinese comparative research on the translated version of *Bronze and Sunflower*. Xu Derong analyzed the stylistic reconstruction in the translated version of *Bronze and Sunflower*, pointed out the problems of rural style and aesthetic loss in the translation, and proposed that attention should be paid to both the representation of the source text style and the readers' reading experience [2]. Other scholars have conducted detailed and meticulous analyses of the translated version from the perspectives of reception aesthetics, dialogue theory, eco-translation theory, translation ethics and narratology. Research on the translation of Cao Wenxuan's other works is also mostly in the form of comparative research with the translated version of *Bronze and Sunflower*. For example, from the perspective of reception aesthetics, He Miao conducted a comparative study on the English translation of *The Straw House* and *Bronze and Sunflower*, analyzed the representation of childlike fun, narrative adjustment and readability of the two translated versions, and pointed out the aesthetic reasons for the relatively poor overseas translation and dissemination effect of *The Straw House* compared with *Bronze and Sunflower* [3]. In addition, some scholars have discussed the translation strategies and poetic elements in the English translation of *The Straw House*, but the number of such studies is relatively small. As for the research on the translated version of *Dragonfly Eyes*, only Zhang Wei has conducted an analysis from the perspective of paratexts, expounding the role of internal and external paratexts in promoting the dissemination and reception of the work [4].

It can be seen that domestic research on the English translation of Cao Wenxuan's works is still in a state of single research object and small quantity, with most studies focusing on the translated version of *Bronze and Sunflower* and lacking attention to other translated versions. In the 2023 China Children's Literature Star List released by Haodu Network, three of the top ten works are by Cao Wenxuan, which shows that the translations of Cao Wenxuan's works have important enlightenment for the international translation of Chinese children's literature. Therefore, attention should be paid to the research on his translations, especially the excellent ones.

## 3. Aesthetics and Translation

The pursuit and exploration of "beauty" in both the East and the West have a long history. In ancient China, Confucius put forward the view of "perfect in both benevolence and beauty", Xunzi advocated "beauty and benevolence bring joy to each other", and Laozi stated that "true words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not true". Western philosophers also have their propositions, such as Plato's "beauty is an idea", St. Augustine's "beauty is the supreme glory

and radiance of God", and Chernyshevsky's "beauty is life". These all reflect the exploration and thinking of "beauty" by individuals and groups, thus demonstrating the practical value of "beauty". The concept of "aesthetics" was first proposed by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1750. He defined aesthetics as a discipline that studies human perceptual cognition and believed that aesthetics is the study of "the perfection of perceptual knowledge". Therefore, aesthetic research is an exploration of the research object in terms of cognition, emotion, will and other aspects.

In the West, the origin of the relationship between aesthetics and translation can be traced back to BC. All debates between "literal translation" and "free translation" also reflect the exploration of aesthetics in translation. Cicero opposed "word-for-word" translation and advocated "sense-for-sense" translation, which shows his emphasis on the beauty of diction and rhetoric in translation. Tytler later put forward the famous "three principles of translation", holding that "a successful translation should penetrate the source text and ultimately comprehend all the beauty of the source text." In China, long before the formal establishment of translation aesthetics, there were many connections between translation and aesthetics. Yan Fu's proposed "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance", among which "elegance" is an aesthetic requirement for the target text; Fu Lei's "spiritual resemblance rather than formal likeness" reflects his aesthetic thinking on the relationship between the "form" and "spirit" of the target text and the source text; Qian Zhongshu's "transformation state" theory requires the target text to reach the artistic conception of the source text in both form and ideological connotation, which is also the connection between his translation thought and aesthetic thinking.

It is evident that aesthetics and translation have a profound origin both in the East and the West. Since the 1970s, translation studies have experienced a cultural turn. Translation is no longer only the conversion between languages but also the communication between cultures. Scholars' research on translation has gradually shifted from the text itself to the study of external cultural factors of translation. Against this background, aesthetics, as a cultural theory, has begun to combine with translation studies, thus contributing to the formal birth of translation aesthetics. Liu Miqing's monograph *An Introduction to Translation Aesthetics* published in 2005 provided a theoretical framework for the study of Chinese translation aesthetics. He divided the research objects of aesthetics into aesthetic subjects and aesthetic objects. The aesthetic object refers to the source text, which can be divided into the formal system and the non-formal system according to its nature. The formal system mainly refers to the set of aesthetic symbols, including perceivable aesthetic information at the levels of phonetics, words, sentences and paragraphs; in addition to the material form and perceivable aesthetic object, there are also non-natural perceptual and non-external components, namely the non-formal system of the aesthetic object, also known as the aesthetic fuzzy set, which includes "emotion" and "image". The aesthetic subject refers to the translator, who is restricted by the aesthetic object and also exerts his subjective initiative. Liu Miqing pointed out that the aesthetic experience in translation needs to go through the process of "understanding - transformation - processing - representation" of the aesthetic object. Meanwhile, he separately decomposed the process of literary translation into four levels: "observation - appreciation - comprehension - translation". Aesthetic representation is the transmission of the aesthetic feeling of the source text, which does not pursue equivalent translation but rather considers the representation of the aesthetic information contained in the aesthetic object. Translators usually adopt methods such as imitation, reconstruction and rewriting to realize the aesthetic representation of the source text as much as possible, and the aesthetic representation of the source text is also the highest pursuit of translation aesthetics. The establishment and development of translation aesthetics in China have provided new ideas and theoretical frameworks for translation studies, expanded the vision of Chinese translation studies, and continuously promoted the development of translation studies.

Due to its own particularity, children's literature needs to convey the perception of beauty to children, so a large amount of aesthetic information can be perceived from it. The following part takes the source text and English version of the children's literary work *Dragonfly Eyes* as the corpus, generalizes the aesthetic information of the formal and non-formal systems in the text, and analyzes how the translator reproduces the beauty in them.

## 4. Case Analysis

### 4.1. Aesthetic Representation of the Formal System

The aesthetic information of the formal system mainly includes information at the levels of phonetics, words, sentences and paragraphs. Beautiful rhythm, accurate word selection, diverse sentence patterns and appropriate structure are all manifestations of beauty, and also enhance readers' reading enjoyment. The representation of the source text's aesthetics not only requires the translator to have the ability of aesthetic cognition but also requires the translator to find the correspondence of aesthetic information between the source language and the target language.

#### 4.1.1. Phonetic Aesthetic Representation

Phonetics is one of the basic forms carrying aesthetic information and is readers' auditory experience of words. The beauty at the phonetic level is mostly reflected in rhythm and cadence. When recognizing and understanding the source text, the translator needs to pay attention to its phonetic beauty to better convey its aesthetic feeling with the target text. Children's literature often uses reduplicated words and onomatopoeia to increase the rhythm and vividness of the text, so that young readers can more personally experience the charm of words.

##### Example 1

Source text: 蓝屋必须永远井井有条、平平安安。她精心安排了六个孩子的学习与生活。(Cao, 2016, p. 24)

Target text: She was determined to keep their family home shipshape, and she devoted herself to the children and their education.(Wang, 2019, p.22).

Due to the monosyllabic characteristics of the Chinese language, reduplication is very common, which is an important embodiment of the rhythmic beauty of Chinese. However, the repetition of single words is rare in English, which makes the translator have to deliberate carefully in the English translation of reduplicated words. Especially in non-poetic texts, it is more difficult to find an expression form that can completely reproduce the aesthetics of the source text. Therefore, it is necessary to find compensation measures in the target language, such as using common rhyming methods such as alliteration and end rhyme to reproduce the phonetic beauty of the source text. In Example 1, 井井有条 and 平平安安 are four-character words with reduplication, which add to the rhythmic beauty of the source text. In the translation, the translator chose the word "shipshape", which means "neat and with everything in its correct place". While ensuring the accuracy, conciseness and coherence of the target text, the translator also used the compensation strategy of internal alliteration to convey the rhythmic beauty brought by the reduplicated words in the source text.

##### Example 2

Source text: 当年一派兴旺的家族产业已摇摇欲坠。到了后来，丝绸生意只是勉强勉强地做着，丝绸工厂也只是气息奄奄地开着。(Cao, 2016, p. 24)

Target text: One of the family's once prosperous silk mills was teetering on the brink of collapse. With the silk business hanging by a thread, life was growing harder and harder.(Wang, 2019, p.23)

The consecutive use of reduplicated words such as 摇摇欲坠, 勉勉强强 and 气息奄奄 in Example 2 not only reflects the difficult operation of the factory in the war-torn era but also adds to the rhythmic beauty of readers' reading experience. However, the consecutive use of multiple reduplicated words is a great challenge for the translator. When processing the source text, Helen Wang used words such as "teetering", "hanging" and "growing harder and harder" to reproduce the phonetic aesthetic information. She adopted the combined strategy of end rhyme with "-ing" and repetition of comparative degrees to reproduce the rhythmic beauty brought by the repetition of reduplicated words in the source text as much as possible, which is a good processing method on the basis of faithfulness to the source text.

#### Example 3

Source text: 只一会儿，雨珠就变大了，落在伞面上，"的笃的笃"响，像是在掉透明的小石子。(Cao, 2016, p. 58)

Target text: The downpour started. Raindrops clattered on the umbrellas like transparent pebbles.(Wang, 2019, p.52)

Onomatopoeia is useful and auditory-stimulating words. Their ability to evoke meaning lies in their imitation of the sounds they represent. Due to the limitations of texts in conveying sensory details through the filter of imagination, authors must use onomatopoeia from time to time to convey more accurate meanings. Onomatopoeia is widely used in both Chinese and English, especially in children's literature, which not only brings dual visual and auditory stimulation to young readers but also adds childlike fun to the text.

In Example 3, the source text uses the onomatopoeia "的笃的笃" to vividly reflect the heavy rain, which is not as soft as drizzle but hits the umbrella like small stones. Fortunately, there are abundant corresponding onomatopoeia between Chinese and English, so the translator only needs to find the corresponding onomatopoeia to retain the aesthetic audio-visual information of depicting sounds. The translator adopted the expression "clattered", which not only reproduces the sound but also gives people a sense of intensity through the consecutive use of plosives such as /k/ and /t/ in its pronunciation, well reproducing the aesthetic information that the source text intends to express.

#### 4.1.2. Lexical Aesthetic Representation

Another unit that can carry aesthetic information is the word. A word is a triple combination of character, phoneme and syllable, and also an overlapping embodiment of sound, form and meaning, thus carrying more aesthetic information. Therefore, Liu Miqing put forward three aesthetic principles for word selection: accuracy, beauty and conciseness. Accuracy lies in accurately expressing the meaning of the source text and adapting to the context; beauty lies in bringing the pleasant feeling of beauty; conciseness lies in using words concisely without redundancy.

#### Example 4

Source text: "他们男人就是这样的。你爸爸尤其是这样，还有你爷爷，一丘之貉。我们女人从来不这样做事的。"(Cao, 2016, p. 109)

Target text: "That's men for you. Especially your baba, and Yeye too. They're birds of a feather, those two. We girls would never do something like that."(Wang, 2022, p.95)

#### Example 5

Source text: 他忽然想起了一个近来经常被人使用的成语，你们是一丘之貉！(Cao, 2016, p. 109)

Target text: Then, suddenly thinking of an expression that had recently become popular: "You're raccoon dogs from the same hill!"(Wang, 2022, p.120)



Idioms are stable and accurate collocations, a diachronic optimized combination, and a concentrated embodiment of the three aesthetic principles. The idiom 一丘之貉 appears many times in the source text, which originally refers to being of the same kind and later metaphorically means being all bad people with no differences from each other. The image of "raccoon dog" is not familiar in English, so it is necessary to find words more in line with the English context such as "bird" and "raccoon dogs" in the translation. In addition, the translator used two different expressions when dealing with the same idiom, also considering the context of the source text. In Example 4, although Nainai is angry, the objects of her criticism are family members after all, so her expression will be milder. Therefore, the translator chose the metaphor "birds of a feather". However, in Example 5, it is the bully's insult to A Lang, so the translator chose the more excessive and rude metaphor "raccoon dogs" to reproduce the bully's anger in the source text. Although it is the same idiom, the translator gave expressions of different levels according to different contexts, which perfectly conforms to the aesthetic principle of "accuracy".

#### 4.1.3. Syntactic and Discourse Aesthetic Representation

Children's literature is characterized by simple sentence patterns, concise language and easy understanding, with frequent use of short sentences, repeated sentences and colloquial sentences. Through analysis, the syntactic characteristics of Cao Wenxuan's *Dragonfly Eyes* are as follows: extensive use of coordinate sentence patterns, many repeated sentences, and a combination of long and short sentences, which conforms to the characteristics of Chinese syntactic structure such as loose structure, concise wording, scattered images and concentrated meaning. English syntactic structure is compact, with emphasis on grammar, consistent tenses and clear connectives. Therefore, the translator needs to adjust the sentence structure in accordance with English grammatical habits to integrate and reproduce the aesthetic information of the source text.

##### Example 6

Source text: 秋天，有风，雨飘到阿梅的脸上和脖子里，凉丝丝的。她缩着身子，还有点儿颤抖。(Cao, 2016, p.57)

Target text: There was an autumn wind. The chill rain ran across her face and trickled down her neck, sending shivers down her spine.(Wang, 2022, p.52)

The source text in Example 6 is composed of scattered short sentences, including descriptions of the environment and characters and the interactive relationship between them, which is a typical Chinese expression. However, if the target text is reproduced in the form of the source text, it will only appear tedious and incomprehensible. Therefore, the translator reconstructed the syntactic structure of the source text in the target text. Although the information is still divided by two periods, the clauses have obviously merged the originally scattered expressions. In this way, the sentence pattern is more concise, in line with the reading habits of the target readers, and showing the coherence beauty of English. At the same time, the translator finally used the consecutive alliterative expressions of "sending", "shivers" and "spine" to reproduce the rhythmic beauty of 凉丝丝 in the source text.

##### Example 7

Source text: "我坦率地告诉你们，我不喜欢你们的这份孝心。" 奶奶的嗓音突然提高，"——点——也——不——喜——欢！" (Cao, 2016, p. 108)

Target text: "I will be frank with you both. You may have thought you were doing the right thing, but I am not happy with what you have done." Nainai's voice suddenly grew louder. "I AM NOT HAPPY WITH IT AT ALL!" (Wang, 2022, p.94)

In Example 7, the source text uses em dashes to show the prolongation of the character's voice and the increase of volume, and displays the character's emotions through visual and auditory

effects, which is a common expression in Chinese. However, em dashes are rarely used in English, so the translator used all caps to show Nainai's anger, which not only reproduces the character's emotions in the source text but also visually reproduces the intensity of the character's feelings, which is an excellent processing method.

#### Example 8

Source text: 奶奶摇了摇头，叹息了一声，回她的房间去了："太不像话了！" 奶奶还说了几句法语。胡妈听不懂，但胡妈听得出口气，差不多就是："太不像话了！太不像话了！"(Cao, 2016, p. 68)

Target text: Nainai shook her head, sighed, and went back to her room. "It's inexcusable!" she said, adding a few more words in French. Mrs. Hu couldn't understand what Nainai was saying, but she could tell from the tone of her voice how angry she was. (Wang, 2022, p.60)

Repeated sentence patterns can be used to emphasize the importance of things or highlight characters' emotions, and at the same time bring phonetic beauty, so repeated sentence patterns are very common in Chinese expressions. In Example 8, the source text repeats "太不像话了!" three times to show Nainai's anger and also leave a visual stimulation to readers. However, English expressions are not used to repetitive expressions, which will make the text tedious and complicated. Therefore, the translator did not follow the repetitive expression of the source text in the target text but adopted the strategy of rewriting. Since the source text states that Nainai spoke in French and Mrs. Hu did not understand, it is also logical not to describe the specific content of the speech. Therefore, the translator chose to reflect the character's anger through the description of the tone, which not only reproduces the aesthetic information of the source text but also conforms to the logical flow of the text at this point.

## 4.2. Aesthetic Representation of the Non-Formal System

In addition to the aesthetic information of the formal system such as phonetics, words, sentences and paragraphs, there is also the aesthetic information of the non-formal system. The aesthetic information in this system is characterized by uncertainty, non-measurability and infinity, thus also known as the "aesthetic fuzzy set". Such aesthetic information is usually hidden in the non-formal system, sometimes elusive and even inexpressible in words. The translator needs to understand, feel and grasp the deep meaning conveyed by the source text to reproduce such aesthetic information in the target text. Such aesthetic information is usually divided into "emotion and aspiration" and "idea and image", and the various elements are not independent but intermingled and highlighted with each other.

### 4.2.1. Emotion

In translation aesthetics, it is essential to accurately grasp the emotions and aspirations of the source text to select words and determine the overall style of the target text, so as to better reproduce the emotional beauty contained therein.

#### Example 9

Source text: 不知是从什么时候开始的，天开始刮风了，并且越刮越大，到了后来，竟然 "呼呼" 地响。那杏花这一两天正开到它最绚烂的时候，而最绚烂的时候，也是它最容易飘落的时候。随着风一阵紧似一阵，一树的杏花，开始纷纷飘落下来，落在钢琴上，落在阿梅的头上、身上。刚刚落下不久，就被吹走了，而后面又有花落了下来，越落越多。灯泡在摇摆，杏花在晃动不停的灯光里，纷纷扬扬地飞舞。阿梅的眼中，一直在闪烁着泪光。后来风小了，花飘落时，慢慢地，轻轻地。(Cao, 2016, p. 172)

Target text: At some point, the wind began to pick up, and eventually to sigh. The apricot tree had been at its most stunning over the past day or two. And it is when a tree is at its most stunning that its petals fall most readily. Each gust of wind blew a shower of white from the tree. The petals fell on the piano, on Ah Mei's head and shoulders. After a moment, they were

blown away, and more petals fell. The light bulb swung too, and the petals twirled and whirled in the swaying light. Ah Mei's eyes glistened with tears. Then the wind calmed, and the petals fell slowly and softly. (Wang, 2022, p.120)

Chinese literature pursues the "integrated beauty" of integrating emotion into scenery and blending feelings with scenes, and scenery description always sets off the characters' psychology. Therefore, the translator should pay more attention to the scenery description in the source text and find the characters' emotions from the scenery. Example 9 describes the scene where the wind gradually intensifies and then calms down while Ah Mei is playing the piano under the apricot tree, with apricot blossoms dancing with the wind. This is not only a description of the environment but also a reflection of Ah Mei's mood. Her emotions, like the wind, are a mixture of excitement at the realization of her dream and gratitude for everyone's support, gradually turning from initial passion to calmness. The fluttering apricot blossoms are just like her complex emotions, which finally return to peace. When expressing the situation of the source text, the translator not only felt the beauty of the scenery in the source text but also the emotional beauty mixed in it. Therefore, she tried to integrate the characters' emotions in the selection of expressions, using the personification "sigh" to show the intensification of the wind. Later, considering the phonetic beauty of the source text, she used "twirled" and "whirled", "slowly" and "softly" to show the rhythmic beauty of the source text as well as the progression and cessation of emotions.

#### 4.2.2. Image

Images cannot be ignored in the non-formal system. The so-called image is the unity of the subjective and the objective, the combination of the author's subjective emotions and aspirations and the external objects. Translating images requires a process of identification, understanding and representation, which is also the aesthetic representation of the source text images.

##### Example 10

Source text: 阿朗将头探出窗外，忽地扯下口罩，然后向空中一抛，那口罩在火车带起的强劲气旋里忽闪着，飘动着，上升着，像一只展翅飞翔的白色的鸟.....(Cao, 2016, p. 230)

Target text: Ah Lang poked his head out the window. All of a sudden he pulled off his mask and threw it into the air. It caught in the air current from the train, flashing and swirling and soaring like a white bird spreading its wings in flight. (Wang, 2022, p.192).

The image of birds is used many times in *Dragonfly Eyes* to reflect the relationship between characters and freedom. In that era, the living situation of A Mei's family was increasingly difficult, just like birds trapped in a cage. Ah Lang wore a mask to isolate himself from the world because of discrimination against his appearance, and the mask was a symbol of his bondage. On the train leaving Shanghai, he felt freedom again, and discarding the mask was breaking free from the bondage. At this time, the image of the bird is not only a metaphor but also a symbol of freedom. The translator adopted the method of imitating the source text to reproduce the aesthetic of the image in the source text, and at the same time used three consecutive words "swirling", "soaring" and "spreading", which not only have alliteration and end rhyme but also highlight the sense of freedom.

## 5. Summary

From the perspective of Liu Miqing's translation aesthetics, this paper analyzes the aesthetic information of the source text and the aesthetic representation of the target text of *Dragonfly Eyes*. Through the analysis of different levels such as phonetics, words, sentences/paragraphs, images and artistic conception, it can be seen that the translator fully perceived the aesthetic information of the source text when translating the source text, and on the basis of faithfulness



to the source text, exerted subjective initiative to reproduce the textual information aesthetically to the maximum extent through imitation and rewriting. Although it is not difficult to translate the meaning of the source text faithfully, how to reproduce the aesthetic information of the source text, especially the beauty in terms of emotions, aspirations, images and other aspects, is worthy of the translator's careful consideration.

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