

# A Comparative Study of the Two English Translations of *The Back* from the Perspective of Reiss's Translation Criticism Theory

Chen Lin, Wang Honghua\*

Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China

\*Corresponding Author.

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the two English translations of Zhu Ziqing's prose *The Back* from the perspective of Reiss's translation Criticism Theory. The article begins with an overview of Reiss's theory, emphasizing the importance of text type orientation and language features. Then, the translations by Zhang Peiji, and by Yang Xianyi&Dai Naidie were systematically compared from the internal linguistic features such as vocabulary, semantics, syntax, rhetoric, as well as the speaker, recipient, cultural difference and translator's subjectivity. The study shows that Zhang tends to adopt direct translation and pursue formal equivalence; Yang & Dai focuses on free translation and emphasizes content communication. The two translation strategies have their own advantages in their attempts to showcase the artistic charm of the original work. The article finally points out that translation requires the translator's creative coordination between respecting the original work and adapting to the target culture.

**Keywords:** Reiss's translation criticism theory; *The Back*; English translation; translation comparison

## 1. Introduction

Literary works are an important carrier of a national culture, playing an indispensable role in disseminating it and promoting the cultural exchanges between China and the other countries. The practice of translation and researching literary works have always been the focus of the translation community. Zhu Ziqing's prose *The Back* condenses the emotions of fatherhood and filial piety within traditional Chinese culture, expressing the implicit and euphemistic love between father and son, showing the introverted and implicit emotional expression of Chinese people. It holds

significant literary value and has attracted numerous translators from both home and abroad to attempt its translation. The study of the English translation of *The Back* is pivotal in exploring how to effectively introduce outstanding Chinese literary works abroad and propagate Chinese culture. [1].

At present, many scholars have studied the English translation of *The Back*, but most of them are based on theoretical perspectives such as Skopos theory and Eco-translatology, and there is still a lack of comparative analysis of the English translation by using Reiss's translation criticism theory. The translation criticism theory proposed by German functional translation theorist Katharina Reiss emphasizes the text-type orientation and analyzes and evaluates the translations from both linguistic and extra-linguistic perspectives, which has been widely used in the field of translation research in recent years. This study aims to analyze the English translations of Zhu Ziqing's *The Back* by Zhang Peiji, Yang Xianyi&Dai Naidie through the lens of Reiss's theory. It conducts a comparative analysis of vocabulary, semantics, syntax, and other linguistic features to explore the translation styles and strategies of these two translations. The findings aim to offer insights for future literary translation practices.

Zhang Peiji, Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie are both famous senior translators in China. They have made great achievements in translation, representing two different translation traditions and paths at home and abroad. Studying and comparing their translation is helpful for summarizing the translation experience of different schools. *The Back* contains rich Chinese cultural connotation, simple and vivid language, meaningful and concise expressions, and the challenge in translate, which tests the translator's literary accomplishment and the ability of C-E(Chinese-English) translation. Therefore, the study of its English translation

can reveal the principles of literary translation. This study has significant theoretical value and practical significance, as it deepens the understanding of the external translation of Chinese literature, enriches the application of translation criticism theory, and promotes the study of literary translation.

## 2. Overview of Reiss's Translation Criticism Theory

Based on Bühler's theory of language function, the German functional translation theorist Katharina Reiss proposed the criticism theory of functional translation, guided by text type and taking into account the internal and external features of language. This theory emphasizes functional equivalence and reader response in translation, breaking through the limitation of focusing solely on the linguistic level, and provides a more comprehensive and systematic framework for translation evaluation [2].

Reiss believes that the fundamental standard for judging the quality of a translation is whether the translation can achieve the same or similar communicative functions as the original text. She pointed out that any translation must be based on the type of the original text, and different text types requiring distinct translation strategies. Therefore, distinguishing between text types marks the initial phase of translation activity. According to the three basic functions of language, Reiss categorizes text into three fundamental types: informative, expressive and operational. The information text prioritizes the transmission of information content, should employ translation methods that faithfully reproduce the concepts and facts of the original text. Expression text focuses on conveying the author's emotions and attitudes, thus requiring a strategy of free translation that aims to mirror the original form and style. Operational texts aim to persuade readers to take action; therefore, the emphasis in translation should be on readability and appeal to elicit a positive response from the readers [3].

Reiss further proposed that to comprehensively evaluate the quality of the translation, not only to investigate whether the translation faithfully conveys the content and form of the original text, but also to pay attention to the influence of extra-linguistic factors on the translation. In terms of linguistic factors, the correspondence degree between the original semantics and

pragmatic language is mainly investigated from the four aspects of vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric and style. Specifically include: whether the vocabulary selection is accurate and appropriate, whether the correct translation captures the intended meaning; whether the syntactic structure aligns with the target language norms; whether rhetorical devices and stylistic characteristics are effectively reproduced; whether the style and tone are consistent; and whether the discourse exhibits appropriate cohesion and coherence. In terms of extra-linguistic factors, the focus is primarily on the constraints and influences of contextual elements such as the speaker, listener, communicative medium, communicative occasion and communicative motivation. Specifically, this includes how cultural background, thought patterns and artistic personality of the speaker are manifested through translation, whether the reading expectations and receptivity of the target audience are taken into account; the impact of translation strategy choices' and how the translator's creative drives and subjectivity influence the translation process.

Reiss's theory of translation criticism holds significance guidance for the translation of literary works. From the perspective of text types, more literary works fall into the category of expressive texts, characterized by the central expression of the author's thoughts and emotions. These texts exhibit a strong unity of form and content, with language that is often rhetorical and charming. Therefore, literary translation should primarily adopt a strategy of free translation, aiming to faithfully reproduce the artistic charm of the original text. The translator must deeply grasp the emotional essence of the work, carefully discern the author's intentions, and adeptly manipulate language and sentence structure. Skillful use of rhetoric is essential to maintaining the stylistic allure of the original text, ensuring that target readers can experience aesthetic enjoyment similar to that of readers of the original. Moreover, literary translation should fully consider extra-linguistic factors. This involves not only faithfully conveying the thoughts and emotions of the original author, but also accommodating the reading preferences of the target audience. Seeking points of convergence across diverse cultural contexts enables the enduring resonance of literary works through dynamic adaptation and creative

transformation in translation. In addition, literary translation represents a process that prominently displays the translator's subjectivity. The translator's creative interpretation and artistic handling significance influence the quality of the translation.

### 3. The Comparison of the Linguistic Factors in the Two English Translations of *The Back*

According to translation criticism theory, linguistic factors primarily encompass vocabulary, semantics, syntax, and rhetoric. Below, we will compare and analyze the translations of Zhang and Yang&Dai at these four levels.

#### 3.1 Comparison of Lexical Features

In terms of vocabulary selection, Zhang's translation emphasizes the precision and delicacy of word meanings, striving to use expressions that closely to the original meaning. For example, “油盐酱醋” is translated as “oil, salt, so-sauce and vinegar”, listed one by one, spare no effort, while Yang& Dai is translated as “seasonings”, in general, omit the details. Another example is the word “脚踏车”, Zhang's translation is “fiacre”, more in line with the context at that time, Yang&Dai's translation means “cart”, it is not accurate. In handling cultural load words, Zhang's translation predominantly employs a combination of literal translation and annotation, providing detailed explanations of the terms. For example, “寒噤” is treated as “had caught a chill and was shivering”, which not only directly interprets the literal meaning, but also explains the deep emotion. In contrast, Yang&Dai's translation is more naturalized, replaced by the corresponding words in the target language, such as “寒噤” to “was in a fit of ague”, which is more authentic and fluent [5].

#### 3.2 Comparison of Semantic Features

At the semantic level, both translations successfully reproduce the literal meaning of the original text, though they differ slightly in detail. For example, “我说道”, Zhang translated as “I tried to comfort him, saying”, adding “comfort” before “saying”, more consistent with the original context; while Yang&Dai's translation as “I said” seems a little flat. And “What do you mean?” A sentence, Zhang translated into “What do you mean by this?”, Fully expressed his son's

confusion and doubts; Yang&Dai translated into “What was the matter?”, didn't seem to fully convey the son's emotions. Another example is “我赶紧说”, Zhang translated into “I hastened to answer”, highlighting the meaning of “hurriedly”; while Yang&Dai translated into “I put in”, not prominent enough tone. In general, Zhang's translation is more faithful and delicate in semantic expression, while Yang&Dai's translation shows a slight tendency of simplification.

#### 3.3 Comparison of Syntactic Features

In terms of syntactic structure, Zhang's translation pays more attention to the imitation and reproduction of the original sentence pattern, and strives to achieve formal equivalence. Such as “我那时真是聪明过头, ...” A sentence, Zhang translated this processing as “I was really too clever that time, ...” Basically maintained the exclamation tone and inversion form of the original sentence. And Yang&Dai translated this translation into “I was then too clever by half, ...”, Although also retained the exclamation tone, but the inversion was changed to the statement language order, slightly changed. Again as “他走了几步, 回过头看见我...便又转身走了” One sentence is long and complex, Zhang's translation also uses two clauses, separated by commas, reproducing the formal structure of the original sentence; while Yang&Dai translated it into three clauses, more in line with the habit of English expression. It can be seen that Zhang's translation is more inclined to “literal translation” and keeps the original sentence pattern as much as possible, while Yang&Dai's translation is more inclined to “free translation”, which adjusts the original sentence pattern appropriately according to the expression habits of the purpose language [6].

#### 3.4 Comparison of Rhetoric Features

In terms of rhetoric, the original text of *The Back* is highly concise, full of metaphors, parallelism, repetition and other rhetorical devices, which brings great challenges to translation. For example, “我望着他的背影, 我的泪很快地流下来了”, Zhang translated into “Looking at his receding figure, I could not hold back my tears”, using the metaphor of “receding figure” to vividly describe the father, at the same time using “could not hold back” to convey his son's uncontrollable sadness, which is basically

equal to the original text. Yang&Dai's translation is "As I watched his retreating figure, tears gushed to my eyes" also uses the use of "retreating figure" metaphor, but the word "gushed" does not seem to fully express the son's repression, slightly straightforward. In addition, the original text also used a lot of parallelism, such as "我那时真是聪明过头,面上装着笑,心里却放着矢。她说'你放心去吧!我给你爸爸说。'我忍不住沉下脸说'要说就趁今天说,明天我就要挂号信去麻烦他了'" Zhang's translation not only imitates the parallel of the original text in sentence patterns, but also is very exquisite in pronunciation, by using "I was really too clever that time to put on a smile while being so sad at heart.", With the rhyme of smile and sad heart to reproduce the rhythmic beauty of the original text. In contrast, on the basis of conveying the original meaning, Yang& Dai's translation makes a moderate simplification of the parallel sentence pattern, which is slightly inferior in the phonetic rhetoric.

Overall, in terms of linguistic factors, Zhang's translation emphasizes form imitation, striving for maximum equivalence with the original text in vocabulary, semantics, syntax, rhetoric, and other aspects, reflecting the "literal translation" approach. The translations of Yang&Dai pay more attention to the transmission of content and are more flexible in form, reflecting the translation idea of "free translation". The two translations lead to the same target, which both better reproduce the language charm of the original text and give readers a similar aesthetic feeling.

#### 4. The Comparison of Extra-linguistic Factors of the Two English Translations of *The Back*

In addition to linguistic factors, the generation of translation is also restricted and influenced by many extra-linguistic factors. According to Reiss's theory, extra-linguistic factors mainly include speaker, receiver, cultural differences and translator subjectivity [7].

##### 4.1 Comparison of the Speaker

The speaker, including cultural background, thought patterns, artistic personality, and other factors, profoundly influences the creation of the original text and also constrains the translator's choices in translation. Zhu Ziqing, the author of *The Back*, is a poet, essayist and scholar. He

concentrates on the great achievements of western culture. His prose combines poetry and philosophy in one furnace, sees the thoughts in the lyric, and accurately and vividly expresses the humanistic feelings of Chinese intellectuals. For example, "我与父亲不相见已二年余了,我最不能忘记的是他的背影。"The opening point, not only explains the time and place, but also foil the sad mood, at the same time to back as a clue, opened the narrative context of the full text, it can be said that every word is brilliant, thought-provoking. Again such as "但我可以看出他的坚强和尽瘁顾虑我的功课,怎见我独身在外,然而又肯放心让我住校..."Words outline, will be the image of the father portrayed chisel, love and do not lose majesty, moving.

Zhang was born in a scholarly family, and received good Chinese and Western education since childhood. When translating, he can not only accurately grasp the ideological connotation of the original text, but also express it in beautiful and elegant English, which can be said to win his charm. If "最" translated to the thing, highlighted, "忘记" translated to efface, more elegant; "背影" appears repeatedly, Zhang translated as his back / his retreating back, and whole being, figure, etc. Behind the words, the translation faintly reveals the author's cultural vision and personality charm.

Yang&Dai both born into prominent families, possessed rich life experiences. They served in diplomatic roles and as university professors. Their focus lay on achieving authenticity and fluency in English expression. While capturing the essence of Zhu Ziqing's prose, they aimed to make the translation accessible and familiar to contemporary English readers' appreciation habits. For example, they translated *The Back* in many parts of the text into back and figure, flexible, giving the reader a vivid image of the father.

##### 4.2 Comparison of the Receiver

The recipient of the translation is the intended reader, whose expectations influence the dissemination and acceptance of the translation within the target language context. The two translations of *The Back* cater to slightly different reader groups, resulting in variations in translation difficulty and the addition of annotations. [8]

Zhang's translation is included in the "Chinese Literary Classics Series" published in the 1960s,

mainly for intellectual readers interested in the Chinese classical literature in European and American countries. Therefore, Zhang pays more attention to retain the exotic atmosphere of the original text in his translation, trying to show the unique charm of Chinese culture. For example, transliterating “包袱” as bao-fu rather than bundle, and treating “脚踏车” as fiacre rather than cab, all reveal an exotic style. At the same time, Zhang also added many notes to the translation, explaining in detail the connotation of some cultural load words, such as bureaucratic position, private school, modern-style school, etc., to help western readers understand the deep meaning of the original text as much as possible.

Yang&Dai's translations primarily target ordinary English readers, aiming to minimize reading obstacles and enhance readability. To achieve this, they employ naturalization techniques in translation, substituting culturally loaded words from the original text with equivalent terms from the target language culture. For instance “油盐酱醋” as seasonings, and “包袱” as parcel. Additionally, they seldom use footnotes, but instead incorporate additional details into the translation. For example, the location of the school of “I” as in Shanghai and the working place of “father” in Peking, so as to help readers quickly grasp the background information and reduce the reading burden.

#### 4.3 Comparison of Cultural Differences

Translation involves communication between different cultures, inevitably be influenced by cultural differences. Chinese and Western cultures exhibit significant disparities in thinking patterns, values, and aesthetic preferences, which somewhat constrain translators' decisions during the translation process.

For example, Chinese culture places emphasis human emotions and values implicit euphemism. It frequently conveys emotions through specific imagery and detailed descriptions. Zhu Ziqing did not directly express his thoughts in the back, but vividly depicted the “父亲的背影”, “母亲泪眼的脸” and other specific pictures to express his grief, giving people a sense of endless aftertaste. Zhang's translation better reproduces the graceful and implicit expression of the original text, There is more ink in the details, If “我强忍着眼泪” is treated as holding back my tears, Highlights the “I” tolerance; Will “I

looked after him,... 我望着他的背影 ,...” processed for Looking at his receding figure, I could not hold back my tears, By using the contrast between figure and tears, It vividly shows the “I” complex inner activities.

In Yang&Dai's translation, some details are moderately deleted or summarized, such as “油盐酱醋” is summarized as seasonings, and “泪眼的脸” is translated to her sad face. The translation omits certain details, emphasizes the main theme of the article, and uses straightforward and fluent language, reflecting the British and American cultural emphasis on content and logic in expression.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through a detailed comparison of the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in the two English translations of Zhu Ziqing's prose, it becomes evident that translation is not merely a mechanical transformation of language, but a process of active coordination between the original work and its translation. On the one hand, an excellent translator must respect the linguistic nuances of the original work, striving for faithful reproduction in vocabulary, syntax, semantic, rhetoric and other aspects,. Simultaneously, they must consider the reception capabilities of the target readers, making flexible adjustments in content and form. On the other hand, the translator should deeply grasp the creative intentions of the original author and understand the expectations and perspectives of the translation's readers. This understanding helps in bridging the cultural differences between China and the West. Furthermore, each translator brings their own aesthetic ideals and artistic pursuits, creatively expressing their own stylistic personality. It is through the interplay of the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that the full meaning of the original work can be elucidated, and the charm of the translated works vividly presented. The exemplary interpretation of *The Back* by Zhang Peiji, Yang Xianyi&Dai Naidie serve as a perfect affirmation of these translation principles.

#### References

- [1] Wang Bingshuang. Discussing the Differences and Similarities Between English and Chinese Through Zhang Peiji's English Translation of *The Back* [J].

- Journal of Huaibei Vocational and Technical College, 2019, 18(6): 72-74.
- [2] Liu Yuyang. A Study on the English Translation of Zhu Ziqing's Prose Congcong from the Perspective of Reiss's Translation Criticism Theory [J]. English Square, 2022(23): 10-13.
- [3] Wang Ge. A Comparative Study of Two Translations of Letters to the Earl of Chesterfield"from the Perspective of Reiss's Translation Criticism Theory [J]. Masterpieces by Famous Authors, 2022(22): 118-120.
- [4] Ding Zhaoxin, Liu Huijun. A Brief Analysis of the English Translation of The Songs of Wisdom from the Perspective of Reiss's Text Type Theory [J]. Young Writers, 2020(23): 34-35.
- [5] Wang Cuimin. Comparative Analysis of Translator Styles: A Case Study of Two English Translations of The Back by Zhang Peiji and Yang Xianyi [J]. Youth Times, 2016(3): 139-139.
- [6] Liang Tingyu. A Study on the Translation Styles of Zhang Peiji and Yang Xianyi's English Translations of The Back [J]. Modern Linguistics, 2022, 10(9): 1934-1943.
- [7] Ye Yuan, Tian Lili. A Comparison of Two English Translations of Zhu Ziqing's The Back[J]. Curriculum Education Research (New Teacher Teaching), 2014(34): 140-140. DOI: 10.3969/j.issn.2095-3089.2014.34.139.
- [8] Jia Lan. An Evaluation of Two English Translations of The Back [J]. Jiannan Literature (Classic Reading), 2014(1): 250-251.