

# Comparative Analysis of Two English Translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” From the Perspective of Functional Equivalence

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“Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” is a prose written by Zhu Ziqing, a famous writer. Many famous translators have translated it into English versions, among which there are many famous works. From the perspective of functional equivalence, this article selects representative fragments to compare the versions of Wang Jiaosheng and Zhu Chunshen, and analyzes their styles and their respective advantages and disadvantages. This article makes an attempt on the review of the translation from the perspective of functional equivalence.

**Keywords:** translation, functional equivalence, Zhu Ziqing, “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”

## Introduction

During his tenure at Tsinghua University, the renowned Chinese writer Zhu Ziqing wrote the classic prose “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” after a night stroll by the pond. The article describes the beautiful scenery that the author saw under the moonlight, subtly expressing dissatisfaction with reality and a complex psychological longing for a fantasy that cannot be achieved (Huang, 2010). The entire text is characterized by its innovative and exquisite structure, and its language is refreshing and elegant, creating a vivid visual experience (Liu, 2008). It has been translated into English by many accomplished translators. Based on Nida’s functional equivalence perspective, this article selects the translations by Wang Jiaosheng and Zhu Chunshen for comparative analysis.

## Functional Equivalence

Nida was a famous linguist and translation theorist and has had a significant impact on translation studies in both the Western and Chinese contexts. He first proposed the viewpoint that “translation is a science” and pioneered the communicative approach to translation studies based on linguistic research. In addition, in his work *Principles of Correspondence*, Nida expounded the idea of dynamic equivalence, arguing that there is no absolute equivalence between languages, whether at the level of meaning or form (Nida, 2004, p. 156). Therefore, translators can only strive for the closest possible equivalence. Nida believed that equivalence can be divided into dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence, with formal equivalence considering both form and content in the translation, including grammar, vocabulary, and meaning, among others. However, due to the significant differences between

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languages, strictly demanding formal equivalence can easily result in stiff and incomprehensible translations. Therefore, Nida argued that in translation, translators should prioritize dynamic equivalence, which requires the response of the original text's readers and the translated text's readers to be as equivalent as possible (Nida & Charles, 1969, p. 24). Dynamic equivalence considers not the matching between the source text and the translation, but rather the matching between the relationships between original text and its readers and the translated text and its readers; its significance lies in shifting the translator's attention from the relationship between the source text and the translation to the relationships between responses of both readers to their texts. Although the responses of the original text's readers and the translated text's readers cannot be completely identical, the translator should strive to achieve the closest possible equivalence in both responses; otherwise, the purpose of the translation cannot be realized. In his work *From One Language to Another*, Nida further developed his theory and introduced the concept of functional equivalence. He believed that the term “dynamic equivalence” may lead people to mistakenly believe that this type of equivalence only involves aspects that influence the readers of the source text and the translation, while the use of “functional equivalence” emphasizes the importance of the textual function and better describes the level of adequacy in translation (Nida, 1993, pp. 123-124). Based on the theory of functional equivalence, Nida proposed some translation principles: Adjustments or footnotes should be made when a formal equivalent translation may cause misunderstandings of the referential meaning or associative meaning of the source text or diminish the stylistic value of the original text; adjustments should be made when a formal equivalent translation cannot express meaning; adjustments should be made when a formal equivalent translation appears stiff and incomprehensible in terms of semantics and syntax.

### Researches on the English Translation of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”

Regarding this excellent prose by Zhu Ziqing, many renowned translators have translated it into English, and the academic community has also conducted in-depth research on the outstanding translated versions. Among them, Yang (2015) used the English translation “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” as an example to explore the method of researching prose translation using translation aesthetics theory. Huo (2011) utilized corpus-based comparative analysis to study the stylistic features of three English translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”. Yang (2008) focused on the English translation of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” to seek ways to reproduce the aesthetic effects of the prose in the translated text. Chen (2021) selected seven English translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” to discuss the fidelity issues in literary translation from both meaning and style perspectives. However, currently, there are not many comparative analyses of the English translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” from the perspective of functional equivalence.

### Case Analysis

#### Example 1

Original: 这几天心里颇不宁静。今晚在院子里坐着乘凉，忽然想起日日走过的荷塘，在这满月的月光里，总该另有一番样子吧。

Wang's version: Of late, I have been **in a rather uneasy frame of mind**. Sitting in my courtyard enjoying the cool evening, I suddenly thought of the lotus pond that I pass on my way day in and day out. Tonight, it must have a charm all its own, bathed in the light of the full moon.

Zhu's version: I have felt quite **upset** recently. Tonight, when I was sitting in the yard enjoying the cool, it occurred to me that the Lotus Pond, which I pass by every day, must assume quite a different look in such moonlit night.

In the Wang translation, “心里颇不宁静” is translated as “in a rather uneasy frame of mind”, while the Zhu translation simply uses “upset”. When people are annoyed, they often do not have the mindset to express their emotions in a more complex language. The original text also briefly describes the author's state of mind in a passing manner, making readers feel that the author is really not in a good mood. In the Wang translation, the complex language structure and phrases give a feeling of carefully “savoring” this pain, while the concise sentence structure in the Zhu translation recreates the feeling of the original text. It can evoke readers' response that is relatively similar to the original text, and in my opinion, the Zhu translation is more natural. As for “总该有另一番样子” in this sentence, the Wang translation is “have a charm all its own”, while the Zhu translation is “assume quite a different look”. The author indeed has an expectation for the lotus pond in the full moon, expecting it to have a charm different from the past. However, the word “charm” is not explicitly stated in the original text, and readers have to interpret it themselves. The Wang translation directly states the charm, while the Zhu translation more authentically uses “different look”, retaining the profound meaning of Chinese language. This can evoke a response from the translated text readers that is similar to the response of the original text readers.

#### Example 2

Original: 没有月光的晚上，这路上阴森森的，有些怕人。今晚却很好，虽然月光也还是淡淡的。

Wang's version: On moonless nights, the place **has a gloomy, somewhat forbidding appearance. But on this particular evening**, it had a cheerful outlook, though the moon was **pale**.

Zhu's version: The foliage, which, in a moon-less night, would **loom somewhat frighteningly dark, looks very nice tonight**, although the moonlight is **not more than a thin, greyish veil**.

The Wang translation focuses more on formal equivalence in this passage, while the Zhu translation undergoes a greater degree of sentence restructuring to better align with the language habits of English speakers. Additionally, the atmosphere and visuals created by the Zhu translation are more vivid and closely aligned with the original text. For instance, the phrase “阴森森的，有些怕人” is translated by Zhu as “loom somewhat frighteningly dark”, whereas Wang translates it as “has a gloomy, somewhat forbidding appearance”. The latter treats “阴森恐怖” as an adjective with “appearance” as the head noun, whereas the former treats “dark” as the head noun, emphasizing the “阴森恐怖” aspect. Furthermore, the clever use of “loom” effectively portrays the visual impression of tree shadows appearing vividly in the darkness, creating a more immersive reading experience for translation readers. Later, Wang translates “今晚却很好” as “but on this particular evening, it had a cheerful outlook”, whereas Zhu's version is “looks very nice tonight”. In my opinion, Wang's translation may be slightly excessive, while Zhu's version is more in line with the original text's plain and concise style. Moving on, “还是淡淡的” is translated by Wang as “pale”, while Zhu translates it as “not more than a thin, greyish veil”. Wang's version is both concise and appropriate, but Zhu effectively portrays the faintness of the moonlight, using “not more than” to convey the meaning of “不过如此” in the original text.

#### Example 3

Original: 曲曲折折的荷塘上面，弥望的是田田的叶子。

Wang’s version: On the **uneven surface of the pond**, all one could see was **a mass of leaves, all interlaced...**

Zhu’s version: All over this **winding stretch of water**, what meets the eye is **a silken field of** leaves...

In the original text, the phrase “曲曲折折的荷塘” is translated as “uneven surface of the pond” in the translation by Wang, while Zhu’s translation is “winding stretch of water”. It is apparent that Zhu’s translation is closer to the visual imagery presented in the original text. For the phrase “田田的叶子”, which describes the dense and interconnected lotus leaves, Wang uses “a mass of” and “interlaced” to express it, while Zhu uses “a silken field of”. Clearly, the dense cluster of lotus leaves cannot be as smooth and delicate as silk, but rather, as Wang describes, they are tangled and overlapping. Therefore, I believe that Wang’s translation here is more functionally equivalent, presenting the readers of the translated text with a visual image similar to that in the original text.

#### Example 4

Original: 这时候叶子与花也有一丝的颤动，像闪电般，霎时传过荷塘的那边去了。叶子本是肩并肩密密地挨着，**这便宛然有了一道凝碧的波痕**。叶子底下是**脉脉的流水**，遮住了，不能见一些颜色；而叶子却更见风致了。

Wang’s version: There was a tremor on leaf and flower, which, with the suddenness of lightning, soon drifted to the far end of the pond. The leaves, jostling and overlapping, **produced, as it were, a wave of deep green**. Under the leaves, **softly** hidden from view, water was **rippling** even its colour was not discernible so that the leaves looked more enchanting.

Zhu’s version: At this moment, a tiny thrill shoots through the leaves and flowers, like a streak of lightning, straight across the forest of lotuses. The leaves, which have been standing shoulder to shoulder, are **caught trembling in an emerald heave of the pond**. Underneath, the **exquisite** water is covered from view, and none can tell its colour; yet the leaves on top project themselves all the more attractively.

A gentle breeze brushed across the lotus pond, leaving a ripple on the clustered lotus leaves. Wang’s translation uses words like “produce” and “wave” to highlight the appearance, while Zhu’s translation uses words like “caught trembling” and “heave” to emphasize the dynamic description. Based on the original text, this should be a combination of movement and stillness, where the focus is on the traces left behind by the breeze after it passes rather than the process of the breeze leaving traces on the lotus pond. Therefore, Wang’s translation is more in line with the original text. “凝碧” refers to a deep green color. It is translated as “deep green” by Wang to stay true to the original text. However, Zhu translates it as “emerald”, which is a brighter shade of green similar to jade, and is relatively less accurate. In the latter part of the sentence, “脉脉” refers to expressing affection silently through eye contact or actions. Wang translated it as “softly”, and “流” in “流水” as “ripple”, highlighting the static nature of water’s “脉脉” and the dynamic nature of its “流”. On the other hand, Zhu described water as “exquisite”, without emphasizing the static nature of water’s “脉脉” and the dynamic nature of its “流”, which is evidently less appropriate. In comparison, Wang’s version presents both aspects very well.

#### Example 5

Original: 月光是隔了树照过来的，高处丛生的灌木，落下参差的斑驳的黑影，**峭楞楞如鬼一般**；弯弯的杨柳的稀疏的倩影，却又像是**画在荷叶上**。

Wang’s version: Moonlight was glowing from behind the trees, and the dense shrubs above cast down **gloomy** ghostlike shadows of **varying lengths and shades of colour**. But the beautiful sparse shadows of the arching willows were like a picture **etched** on the lotus leaves.

Zhu’s version: The moon light is streaming down through the foliage, casting bushy shadows on the ground from high above, **dark** and **checkered**, like an army of ghosts; whereas the benign figures of the drooping willows, here and there, look like **paintings** on the lotus leaves.

Before the first semicolon in this sentence, the Wang translation is more accurate and detailed in portraying the atmosphere created by the dark shadows of the shrubs, compared to the Zhu translation. For example, Wang’s “gloomy” is closer to the original Chinese phrase “峭楞楞的鬼” than Zhu’s “dark”. Additionally, Wang’s “varying lengths and shades of color” highlights the uneven and mottled nature of the shadows, whereas Zhu’s “checkered” is a simple description. Regarding the word “画” in “画在荷叶上” (painted on the lotus leaf), Wang uses the word “etch”, while Zhu uses “paint”. In my opinion, “etch” seems too harsh and is not suitable for describing a delicate lotus leaf as thin as a cicada’s wing. Zhu’s “paint” is more appropriate.

#### Example 6

Original: 于是又记起《西洲曲》里的句子……

Wang’s version: This in turn revived my memory of the following lines in the “**West Isle Ditty**”...

Zhu’s version: Then I recall those lines in **Ballad of Xizhou Island**...

Wang translated the word “曲” in “西洲曲” as “ditty”, while Zhu translated it as “ballad”. According to the definition in the Oxford Dictionary, “ditty” means a short simple song, while “ballad” means either (1) a song or poem that tells a story or (2) a slow popular song about love. “西洲曲” is the longest lyrical poem in the ancient Chinese Southern Dynasties folk songs and expresses a girl’s longing and yearning for her beloved. Clearly, this poem is not short and belongs to the genre of lyrical poetry. Therefore, using “ballad” would enable readers to accurately understand the genre of this poem.

### Conclusion

In general, both versions by Wang Jiaosheng and Zhu Chunshen are excellent works, each with its own merits and shortcomings. From the perspective of functional equivalence, Wang’s translation is more accurate in portraying objective scenery descriptions with precise details, presenting a visual image that is closer to the original text for readers of the translated version. On the other hand, Zhu’s translation conveys the author’s subjective feelings and psychological state in depicting the original text’s subjective emotions. Moreover, Zhu excels at reproducing the author’s language style, allowing readers of the translated version to experience the linguistic charm of the original text. The theory of functional equivalence has great reference value for evaluating translations and guiding translation practices, and further research and discussions in this area are needed in the future.

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