

# Two Translations of the Judgment of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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*A Dream of Red Mansions* is an ancient Chinese chapter-length fictional novel and the first of the Four Great Classical Novels of China. The judgments of the major characters within the book have been studied by many experts. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the translation strategies and their effects adopted by different translators for distinct translation purposes by comparing varied translations of the judgments and some of the allusions within them in the two English translations, Yang Xianyi and Hawkes.

*Keywords:* *A Dream of Red Mansions*, judgments, skopos theory, comparative and analysis

## Introduction

Allusions are an ancient cultural tradition that originated from stories, legends and proverbs in ancient books, which have a profound influence on our thoughts. They allow readers not only to learn about ancient culture, but also to better understand the meaning and context that authors want to express, and to realize author's purpose of his book. However, the cultural background knowledge of these allusions may be unknown to readers from other countries, and thus may cause a certain cultural gap. Therefore, translators of the book need to adopt appropriate strategies when dealing with these allusions, so that readers of the target language can both understand the meaning of allusions and comprehend their connotations. By following different translation objectives and adopting different translation strategies, translators can create a unique effect and bring readers a brand-new reading experience. As the first of the four Chinese classical novels, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been translated into more than 20 languages and there are more than 60 related translations, which are translated by Yang Xianyi, Dai Naidie, David Hawkes and John Minford, respectively. The Yang's version and Hawkes' version are of great significance in helping English readers to read and understand *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and therefore they have become an important source for scholarly discussion of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. There are countless comparative analyses of the translation of allusions in these translations, mostly focusing on the discussion of translation methods such as naturalization and alienation. However, the author of this paper argues that regardless of which version of translation, its method can not just be limited to one strategy or method, but more of a combination of various methods and strategies. Therefore, it is impossible to determine which translation is more successful in translating the Jinling Judgment (Now Nanjing). However, the functionalist

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theory of Skopos Theory provides a new perspective for us to comparatively analyze the English translation of the Judgment.

### **The Current Situation of The English Translation Study of *A Dream of Red Mansions***

The English translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* underwent three major movements. The first occurred between 1830 and 1893, during which four abridged translations of fragments emerged, yet no complete translated version was ever published. The second occurred between 1927 and 1958, during which three adaptations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* emerged. The third occurred between 1973 and 1982, when two complete translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* appeared, each with its own distinctive language, translations of Hawkes and Yang, which are now the main translations that have been widely studied. With the introduction of the Yang's and Hawkes' translations, Chinese academic journals have also published articles on the study of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which shows that the translations of Yang and Hawkes have played a crucial role in the study of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and its English translation. Since 1980, translation scholars' evaluations of the English translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* have also focused on specific linguistic and textual diction, which is a more traditional perspective. In *A Brief Discussion on the Idiomatic Treatment in the New English Translation of A Dream of Red Mansions*, Zhang Peiji analyzed the two translations in depth, putting forward unique insights combined with a large number of examples to prove them. It not only objectively evaluates the translation method of idioms, but also provides different perspectives for later translators to learn how to translate Chinese idioms. In addition to the detailed study of meticulous textual usage, many scholars also have disputed the translation methods of the title of this book. Since the original manuscript of *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin failed to survive, the name of the original book itself is highly controversial, not to mention the English translation. Through Xiao Zhong's multifaceted study of the English translation history of *A Dream of Red Mansions* over the past 150 years, and his in-depth analysis of the unique meaning of the term 'Red Mansions' in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, as well as its actual usage in English, he finally arrives at a convincing conclusion: *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the best translation of title of this book. In addition, many other scholars have analyzed the English translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the perspectives of standard, method, theory and strategy of translation. Besides the several analytical perspectives mentioned by the author, many scholars have compared and analyzed the Yang and Hawkes translations from different angles, which has made the research on the English translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* increasingly diverse in the field of translation studies.

### **Overview of Purpose Theory**

Purpose Theory is the core theory of the German functionalist school, which introduced behaviorist theory into the field of translation studies and made significant contributions to translation theory. Vermeer and Reiss proposed functionalist purpose theory in the 1970s, which became the most influential academic perspective in the German translation community at the time. China has achieved significant accomplishments in exploring functionalist purpose, a field that encompasses the introduction and translation, summarization and evaluation, and understanding and practice, thereby delving into topics such as translation criticism, strategies, and education of translation. Although research on purpose theory in China started slightly later, significant achievements have

been made through the efforts of many scholars and experts. Gui Qianyuan's Three Translators from the Federal Republic of Germany is considered a pioneering work in the field of translator theory, although its outstanding performance did not receive widespread attention at the time. Subsequently, Zhang Nanfeng and Chen Xiaowei published articles evaluating functionalist purpose theory, laying the foundation for its dissemination. The three basic translation principles of functionalist purpose theory are: the purpose principle, the coherence principle, and the fidelity principle. The purpose principle states that translation should meet the expectations of the target readers within the linguistic environment of the target text, which is the core principle of the entire translation process. "Purpose" typically refers to the communicative purpose of the translation. According to the coherence principle, translation must consider the background knowledge and actual circumstances of the readers to ensure semantic coherence and that the translation can be understood by the target readers and aligns with their language habits. Additionally, the fidelity principle requires that the translation maintain a correspondence between the source text and the target text, although it does not require complete consistency in content. Fidelity and coherence are interdependent, and the purpose principle is the most important link between them.

### **A Comparative Analysis of the English Translations of Certain Judgment Verses in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from a Teleological Perspective**

The Judgment verses of Jinling, composed of fourteen poems, depict the fates of fifteen key female characters in *A Dream of Red Mansions* and play a significant role in guiding the narrative of the entire book. Most of these verses are imbued with a mysterious meaning, deeply portraying the personalities, experiences, and future of the protagonists. Ancient Chinese language artists created many excellent forms of expression, one of which is the judgment verse. This form of language is both musical and formal, while also rich in meaning. This paper will analyze and appreciate the judgment verses in Yang and Hawkes' translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Xichun's judgment verse reads in Chinese is “勘破三春景不长，衣顿改昔年装。可怜绣户侯门女，独卧青灯古佛旁。” Here, the “三春” refers to Xichun's three sisters: Yuan Chun, Ying Chun, and Tan Chun, as well as their tragic fates. It depicts Xichun's despondency after witnessing her older sisters' misfortunes and her subsequent turn to Buddhism for solace. It also implies the fleeting nature of spring in the natural world. Usually, only within a specific context can most readers better understand the hidden lamentation about the tragic fates of Xichun's sisters. Therefore, whether it is Yang's translation “she sees through the transience of spring” or Hawkes' “the spring scene's transient state,” both retain the rhetorical devices of the original text, making it difficult for readers to fully grasp its meaning. This can also make the true reason for Xichun's later decision to become a nun seem confusing. In terms of pronoun choice, Hawkes uses the second person “you”, which creates a sense of interaction with the reader, making the reading experience feel like a conversation with the characters in the book, thus enhancing the interactive feeling. On the other hand, Yang uses the third person “she”, which is more objective and focuses on describing the fate of the characters in the book. Compared to Hawkes' “so great a house,” Yang's “a wealthy noble house” more accurately and straightforwardly conveys the meaning of “绣户侯门” (embroidered door and noble gate), aligning better with the principle of faithfulness in Skopos Theory and effectively conveying to readers that Xichun comes from a noble background. However, in translating “女” (female), Yang chose the word “child”, which may cause some ambiguity and leave readers unclear about

Xichun's true age and gender. In this regard, Hawkes' direct translation as "daughter" is clearer and more intuitive. The last line, "独卧青灯古佛旁" (lying alone beside the green lamp and ancient Buddha), paints a vivid picture of a young girl sitting beside a dimly lit lamp and an ancient Buddha, her heart heavy and melancholic, striking the wooden fish, evoking sighs from readers. Yang's translation of the last line, "by the dimly lit old shrine", also creates a somber and sad atmosphere, further highlighting the hardships of Xichun's life.

Yuan Chun's judgment verse describes her arduous life in the imperial palace and affirms her status and power. "三春" means that three springs vie for the beauty of early spring, and "虎兕相逢" (the encounter between the tiger and the rhinoceros) symbolizes Yuan Chun's twenty years of living in danger within the palace. In translating "twenty years", Hawkes uses "when twenty years in life's hard school", aiming to convey the hardships of Yuan Chun's life in the palace. However, the word "hard" is too shallow, significantly weakening the depth of hardship implied by "twenty years", and the word "辨" (arbitrate) is not fully translated, failing to meet the principle of faithfulness in Skopos Theory. Yang, on the other hand, uses "arbitrate" to indicate that Yuan Chun has been cautious and diligent during her twenty years in the palace, never slackening. This also highlights the nobility and power of Yuan Chun's position as an imperial concubine. Two translations both directly translate "榴花" (pomegranate) as "pomegranate", but the pomegranate in Chinese carries the connotation of fertility and good fortune. Directly translating it as "pomegranate" adheres to the principle of faithfulness in Skopos Theory but fails to convey the deeper meaning. "三春" (three springs) and "初春" (early spring) both reflect the perspectives of the Jia family daughters, with "初春" referring to Yuan Chun and "三春" suggesting that the other three sisters in the Jia family did not receive the honors they deserved. In this sentence, Yang translates "三春" as "last spring" directly conveying the concept of time and perhaps foreshadowing the tragedy that would occur three years later. The phrase "虎兕相逢大梦归" (tiger and rhinoceros meeting) expresses a sense of illusion and danger, metaphorically indicating Yuan Chun's tragic fate of dying after struggling in the palace. It also reflects the natural law of rise and fall and the survival rule of women in the palace. Hawkes further intensifies this concept using stronger metaphors, such as translating "大梦归" (great dream returns) as "your great dream shall end", which is more prominent than Yang's translation. However, the use of "great" is overly positive, which does not align with the original intention, as Yuan Chun's end was not a happy departure but a tragic death after struggle.

The evaluation of Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, "可叹停机德, 堪怜咏絮才" (Alas for the virtue of the loom, pity the talent of the willow down), both phrases derive from ancient allusions. "停机德" (virtue of the loom) comes from the Biographies of Exemplary Women in the Book of the Later Han, telling the story of Yue Yangzi's wife who cut the thread on the loom to advise him not to give up halfway. In this judgment verse, "停机德" laments that although Xue Baochai possesses the virtues of an ideal wife and mother, her advice has no effect. Yang translates "停机德" as "her wifely virtue", using "wife" to directly convey the meaning of feudal womanly virtues. Hawkes, however, chooses "female", which is vague and lacks the specific identity of an advisor, losing the information contained in the original allusion. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, the translation should allow target readers to appreciate the connotations of the original text to achieve effective communication. In this regard, Hawkes' translation does not fully meet this standard. "咏絮才" (talent of the willow down) refers to Xie Daoyun's classic phrase "未若柳絮因风起" (Not so much like willow-down borne

on the breeze, which is translated by Yang Xianyi) in her poem about snow. In the judgment verse, this allusion is used to describe Lin Daiyu's intelligence and also deeply expresses the author's sympathy for talented women with tragic fates. The translation of “咏絮才” is rendered as “her wit to sing of willow-down” but due to differences in cultural context, the original meaning can be easily misunderstood. The translator should provide relevant annotations to help readers understand if they want to retain the cultural depth and ethnic characteristics of the original text. In the judgment verse, the author uses “可叹” (alas) and “堪怜” (pity) to express sorrow and sympathy for the two young girls. In Yang's translation, he uses accurate expressions like “Alas” and “poor” to convey the author's emotions, giving readers a sense of being there. In contrast, Hawkes' translation lacks emotional words and focuses on accurately conveying the meaning. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, this approach fails to effectively convey the author's emotions to the readers.

### Conclusion

Translation is far more than a simple conversion of language symbols. Throughout the translation process, translators need to consider multiple factors and choose the most suitable translation strategies and methods to ensure that the original text is accurately and fluently conveyed. Additionally, translators must take into account the cultural background of the target language and select words and expressions that best convey the original content. This is especially true for literary works, which are rich in cultural traditions. Translators must not only accurately convey the words and meanings of the text but also reflect the corresponding cultural connotations.

For example, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* tends to adopt a foreignizing translation strategy, aiming to comprehensively convey Chinese traditional culture to the target language readers. Their translation focuses on presenting the cultural elements of the original text, striving to retain the authentic style and vocabulary to ensure that readers can experience the cultural background of the original work. In contrast, David Hawkes's version is more inclined to showcase the beauty of the Chinese language to English readers, thus adopting a domesticating translation strategy. His translation places more emphasis on making the text easily understandable for readers and integrating certain target language cultural characteristics into the translation, allowing English readers to more easily immerse themselves in the story. In summary, during the translation process, translators need to choose appropriate translation strategies and methods based on different contexts and the needs of the readers, to ensure that the original text is accurately and fluently conveyed and to preserve as much of the cultural content as possible.

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