

A Study of the English Translation of Dragonfly Eyes from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism

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Abstract: Dragonfly Eyes is a work by renowned Chinese children's literature author Cao Wenxuan, possessing its own literary and cultural value. Using a theoretical framework based on the "3+1" dimensions—the trinity theory of "text-behavior-society" and "Extra-Translation"—this study examines the English translation of the children's literature work Dragonfly Eyes. It explores the influence of subjective and objective factors on the translator and the resulting efforts toward "truth-seeking" and "Utility-attaining". The findings reveal that the translator strives to balance these two approaches, though minor shortcomings exist. The translation practice demonstrates high rationality when evaluated within its social context. This study enriches the trinity theory of Translator Behavior from an applied perspective and offers valuable insights for the international dissemination of Chinese children's literature.

Keywords: Dragonfly Eyes, Translator Behavior Research, the trinity theory

1. Introduction

Children's literature is an indispensable and vital component within the literary system. It is a genre centered on children, focusing on their physical and mental well-being while aligning with their aesthetic sensibilities and psychological development^[1]. The new century in China has seen the emergence of numerous children's literature authors, among whom Cao Wenxuan stands as one of the most influential figures internationally. Dragonfly Eyes is a children's novel by Cao Wenxuan. Centered on the daily interactions between Ah Mei and her grandmother, the story reflects the profound bond between grandparent and grandchild, showcasing Ah Mei's innocence and her grandmother's inherent kindness and goodness^[2]. The English translation of Dragonfly Eyes was rendered by Helen Wang, a veteran British literary translator dedicated to translating and disseminating Chinese children's literature abroad. However, the English edition of Dragonfly Eyes remains understudied from a translation perspective. Analyzing this translation and examining the translator's behavior could yield valuable insights into successful approaches to translating Chinese children's literature. Such research would help propel original Chinese children's literature onto the global stage and amplify its international influence.

2. An Overview of Translator Behavior Criticism Theory

Within the framework of translator behavior criticism, "Extra-Translation" and "Intra-Translation" constitute two distinct yet interconnected research domains. "Intra-Translation" refers to studies focusing on code conversion and meaning reproduction within the translation process^[3]. "Extra-Translation" denotes studies outside the text, examining the generative context of the text, and addressing the various subjective and objective factors that constrain translator

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behavior^[4]. The “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity evaluation system is constructed upon theoretical foundations such as the Intra-Translation-Extra-Translation analytical framework and the Truth-seeking-Utility-attaining behavior continuum model. It can be articulated as the “Text-Linguistic Perspective,” “Behavior-Text Perspective,” and “Behavior-Society Perspective”^[5]. Shifting focus from text-centered to process-centered approaches, it views translation as a social activity, presenting an overall progressive yet cyclical relationship that ultimately serves dynamic, human-centered relational research. Both the Intra-Translation-Extra-Translation analysis concept and the trinity theory employ hierarchical analysis in studying translator behavior^[6]. These approaches analyze translator behavior based on its rationality, which in turn requires confirmation through the balance between the translator’s commitment to truth-seeking and utility-attaining^[6]. Extra-Translation factors can serve as contextual elements for “behavior.” Integrating the trinity with Extra-Translation dimension (3+1 dimensions) brings us closer to the overarching goal of translation criticism^[7].

Therefore, applying a theoretical framework combining the trinity system with Extra-Translation factors to study the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* facilitates the integration of theory and practice, reflecting a human-centered dynamic translation process. By analyzing the contextual factors of translator behavior and examining the translator’s “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” efforts from Text-Linguistic and Behavior-Text perspectives, this study explores the “effects” of the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* in its social interactions and the rationality of translator behavior within the Behavior-Society perspective.

3. Analysis of Translator Behavior in the English Translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* Based on the “3+1” Dimensions

3.1 Text-Linguistic dimension

The “Text-Linguistic” dimension examines how closely the translation adheres to the original text’s meaning. Within this dimension, texts are studied from a linguistic perspective to determine whether the translation accurately reflects the original’s meaning. The following examples analyze translator fidelity through lexical choices. It reveals the translator’s efforts to recreate the original literary atmosphere. For culturally loaded terms, the translator preserves the source text’s cultural connotations and emotional nuances, accurately conveying meaning through “truth-seeking” efforts. To facilitate reader comprehension, the translator also employs free translation by substituting with appropriate expressions in the target language, demonstrating a degree of “utility-attaining” effort built upon fidelity.

The onomatopoeic term “淅沥淅沥” in the original text describes the faint, continuous sound of wind and rain, often used to depict the falling of water droplets or the gentle patter of rain on surfaces. The translator employs a verb phrase to render this sound effect. “Splashing all around” vividly portrays the scene of continuous rain hitting the ground and creating splashes, effectively conveying the original text’s atmospheric imagery. The translator splits the verb “跳动” into “bounce off” and “fall again,” depicting raindrops bouncing up and down on the umbrella surface to emphasize the dynamic movement. By employing a series of verb phrases, the translator not only conveys the literal meaning of the verbs but also focuses on conveying the vivid imagery carried by the original verbs, restoring the dynamic beauty of the original scene.

The term “书生气” carries both positive and negative connotations, describing someone detached from reality and lacking practical experience, while also referring to the refined, cultured demeanor cultivated through scholarly knowledge. In the original text, this word is used to depict the grandfather’s voice transforming from coarse to refined and elegant, highlighting his cultured disposition. Therefore, the translator chose “erudite” as the corresponding term, accurately capturing the cultural connotations and emotional undertones here. The example demonstrates that when translating culturally loaded terms, the translator pays close attention to their underlying cultural connotations and emotional undertones. By selecting appropriate equivalents within the specific context, the translator avoids misinterpretation and ambiguity, ensuring the precise transmission of the original meaning.

In English, the word “sour” does not carry the connotation of sadness, so it cannot be translated literally. The term “pang” in the translation describes sudden grief and pain, conveying the true meaning of the original text while fitting the contextual flow. This demonstrates the translator’s awareness of cultural differences between Chinese and Western contexts. Compared to “bitterness,” which also conveys “pain and sorrow,” “pang” emphasizes suddenness and brevity, capturing

the grandmother's momentary emotional outburst. By understanding the character's emotions embedded in the source text, the translator employed a free translation approach, selecting appropriate expressions in the target language. This demonstrates the translator's utility-attaining efforts to preserve cultural nuances while accommodating readers' comprehension levels.

The above examples demonstrate a balance between accuracy and utility in translation. However, careful contextual consideration is still required for certain terms to avoid distorting the original meaning. For instance, translating “精打细算的主人” as “a meticulous housekeeper” requires nuance. The core meaning of “精打细算” in this context is careful budgeting and efficient use of resources. While “meticulous” conveys attention to detail, it extends beyond financial matters. Thus, rendering it as “careful with money” better captures the intended emphasis on financial prudence.

3.2 Behavior-Text dimension

The “Behavior-Text” dimension focuses on how the translator's will and actions influence the text. It requires preserving the core meaning of the source text while considering societal needs, particularly those of the readers. *Dragonfly Eyes* is a work conveying love and beauty, where the portrayal of its main characters significantly influences young readers. During translation, the translator emphasized depicting and highlighting positive character traits, making limited and reasonable adjustments to the original text when necessary. By shaping the grandmother's noble and virtuous character, the translator guided young readers to perceive the warmth and beauty of humanity. Furthermore, in the cross-cultural transmission process, the translator places greater emphasis on promoting traditional Chinese culture, aiming to spark readers' interest and subsequently guide them toward a deeper understanding of the relevant cultural context. “斤斤计较” often carries a negative connotation in Chinese, describing someone who nitpicks over trivial matters. The translator avoided a literal rendering, opting instead for the neutral “compare prices.” This approach not only preserves the grandmother's positive image but also subtly highlights the bargaining wisdom honed through life's hardships—she is not petty, but rather a matriarch who quietly manages the household with meticulous care during difficult times. Thus, the translator skillfully crafts the image of a frugal, selfless matriarch.

As China's second-largest opera genre originating in Shaoxing, Yue Opera is renowned as “the most widely disseminated regional opera form.” The translator opted not for a literal rendering but instead rendered it as “Shaoxing Opera.” The former risks diluting cultural connotations and may confuse readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture, as the identical pinyin could lead to confusion with another major opera form, Cantonese Opera. The latter clearly points to the Opera's birthplace—Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. This avoids misunderstandings while sparking young readers' curiosity about its origins, guiding them to explore its historical legacy and evolution. This approach fosters recognition and acceptance of traditional Chinese culture in international dissemination.

3.3 Behavior-Society dimension

The “Behavior-Society” dimension focuses on evaluating the actions of translators and other agents within a social context, emphasizing not only the “society” itself but also the “effects” generated by the interaction between behavior and society. Examining these effects through social feedback data also concretely manifests the function of translation. Below, we explore the social acceptance of the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* by examining reviews and comments on book review websites, as well as the honors received by the translated work.

Goodreads is currently the world's largest online reading community, where readers can rate and write reviews of books. Relevant metrics reflect a book's popularity and specific evaluations. Searching for “Cao Wenxuan” or “Helen Wang” reveals that as of November 2025, the top two English translations of Cao Wenxuan's literary works on the site, ranked by overall star rating, were both rendered by translator Helen Wang. Among these, the English edition of *Dragonfly Eyes* boasts the highest percentage of five-star ratings at 51%, indicating strong acclaim. As the world's largest online retailer by product variety, Amazon's data shows that the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* holds a 4.6-star rating (out of 5), with a remarkable 62% of reviewers awarding it five stars.

The Batchelder Award is a prestigious honor in the field of American children's literature. In 2023, *Dragonfly Eyes* was selected as an Batchelder Honor Book, becoming the first Chinese children's novel to receive this distinction since the

award's inception.

In summary, the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* has demonstrated outstanding performance in both reader feedback and market reception, achieving notable success and social impact. The translation prioritizes the reader's experience, effectively fostering cultural exchange and communication, and has received positive responses. This social impact not only validates the translator's approach but also provides valuable reference for the translation of Chinese children's literature into other languages.

3.4 Extra-Translation dimension

Within the "text-behavior-society" trinity analytical framework, translation external factors can serve as behavioral contextual elements, encompassing a range of subjective and objective factors. The following primarily explores the intricate internal and external factors underlying translator behavior, focusing on translators' translation-oriented cognitive tendencies and readers' aesthetic demands.

Translator's Tendencies to Translation: Helen Wang, translator of the English edition of *Dragonfly Eyes*, believes translation requires thorough comprehension and careful consideration of word choice. Translators should maintain a prudent attitude, steering clear of overly literal or overly interpretive translations. Furthermore, when translating children's literature, Wang's approach consistently incorporates respect for young readers. She believes word selection and linguistic style must evolve with the times, avoiding the limitations imposed by overly simplistic language. Children's literature must first captivate readers while honoring the original work. It should also prioritize the long-term transmission of literary value and educational significance, particularly by enabling young readers to perceive the love and beauty inherent in humanity through the stories.

Reader Needs and Aesthetic Preferences: The English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* primarily targets teenagers and children. Therefore, the translation must avoid dryness and tedium, emphasizing vividness and the creation of visual imagery. Beyond employing verbs to enhance the dynamic quality of the original's atmosphere, the translation also uses techniques like rhyme to boost the text's appeal. For instance, "鼓噪着跑向校门口" is rendered as "run higgledy-piggledy to the gate", vividly conveying the original's noisy imagery while naturally capturing the children's innocent, lively, and vibrant state. Furthermore, this technique of overlapping rhymes creates a rhythmic quality that makes the text melodious and enjoyable to read. At the cross-cultural transmission level, translators also help readers gain deeper insights into Chinese culture and spark their interest in further exploring different cultures.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the translator's approach to the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* through the "3+1" Dimensions in Translator Behavior Criticism. It reveals that the translator's work was shaped by their own translation mindset and the aesthetic preferences and needs of the target audience: In the "Text-Linguistic Perspective", the translator focuses on conveying the literary atmosphere of the original text, striving to preserve its cultural connotations and emotional nuances. Within the "Behavior-Text Perspective", the translator strives to shape noble and warm character portrayals, promote love and beauty, emphasize stimulating reader interest and fostering cross-cultural understanding. From the perspective of the "Behavior-Society," the English translation of *Dragonfly Eyes* received positive social evaluations. The translator strives to achieve a balance between "truth-seeking" and "utility-attaining", demonstrating high behavioral rationality. However, certain issues warrant attention. This practice enriches the empirical application of translator behavior criticism theory in children's literature translation, offering valuable insights for the future translation and international dissemination of Chinese children's literature.

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