



A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of Science Fiction *Flowers for Algernon* from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

Lin Wang^{1,2}

¹School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China.

²School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China.

ABSTRACT

The Hugo Award for The Three-Body Problem has greatly contributed to the influence of China's science fiction, attracting a large number of potential readers. Compared to serious literature, science fiction places greater emphasis on the scenario-based experience of readers. The introduction of reception aesthetics into translation demonstrates the transformation from translators-centered approach to readers-centered approach. Thus, readers are constantly aligning themselves with their own experience, emotion and interest rather than mechanically reading the text, showing a dynamic relationship between the work and readers. In this sense, the translation studies of science fiction can be combined with reception aesthetics. This paper, based on reception aesthetics, explores translation strategies of Flowers for Algernon through a comparison of three concepts of horizon of expectations, appealing structure and implied readers and suggests methods for better expectations by readers.

KEYWORDS: *Flowers for Algernon; reception aesthetics theory; comparative study*

INTRODUCTION

As a literary genre that originated in the Western world, science fiction, introduced via translation to China around the beginning of the 20th century, is still not mainstream literature category in China. However, excellent science fiction has provided much inspiration for scientific development and human progress such as how to deal with the relationship between technology and nature, and how to face the future challenges. In this sense, it is particularly important to study some of the best science fiction in terms of translation. *Flowers for Algernon* is a short science fiction and subsequent novel written by Daniel Keyes in 1958 and first published in 1959, and it won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1960 and was joint winner of Nebula Award for Best Novel in the same year. *Flowers for Algernon* takes biotechnology as its theme, within which the modification of the human body through biological experiments and the application of surgery and drugs to alter people's intelligence have triggered a series of changes and reflections that are very close to human reality. In this sense, it is worthwhile to study this science fiction and its Chinese versions.

In terms of research on translation of science fiction, related research falls into two types, namely the history of science fiction translation (Wang, 2015; Bai, 2019; Yao, 2020) and the

translation methods and strategies (Gao, 2016; Lin, 2020; Ma, 2020) from various perspectives. It is found that 1) current translation research mainly focuses on the science fiction like *Santi* trilogy and *Folding Beijing*, 2) current research is mainly about single version, and 3) current research is mainly text-oriented rather than readers-oriented. In terms of research on *Flowers for Algernon*, related research is mainly about literary analysis and appreciation (Zhang, 2022; Qi, 2020).

In view of limitations of current research, this paper, based on reception aesthetics and from the perspective of translation readers, makes a comparative study on two Chinese version by Xiao Zhitang and Chen Chenghe respectively in order to explore various translation methods and strategies on lexical, syntactical and discourse levels.

RECEPTION AESTHETICS

Reception aesthetics arose in the mid-1960s. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser are the founders of this theory, and five professors at the University of Konstanz can be regarded as its main representative scholars with the name of the "Konstanz School". Zhu Liyuan (2004) suggests that the most fundamental feature of reception aesthetics is that it places the readers at the center of literary and aesthetic research.

Ma Xiao (2000) explains that by examining and reflecting on previous literary theories, it is argued that the traditional



external (writer-centered) or internal (work-centered) study of literary works has severed the connection between literary works and readers, failing to take into account the active participation of readers. The theory has a significant impact on research in both the literary and aesthetic fields. Its influence in translation is mainly reflected in the shift to reader-centeredness. The following section presents three important concepts, namely horizon of expectations, appealing structure and implied readers.

Horizon of Expectations

Jauss puts forward the term “horizon of expectation” as the core concept of reception aesthetics theory. Jauss (1987) supposed that a literary work, even if it appears as a new face, cannot present itself as absolutely new in an information vacuum, but it can presuppose a special reception for the reader through foreshadowing, overt or covert signals, familiar features or hidden hints. It evokes the memory of previous readings and brings the reader into a specific emotional attitude.

Holub (1984) explains that pre-understanding as everything in a reader’s mind before he reads a certain text. According to Jauss, Zhu Liyuan (2004) states that the anticipatory field of view is both the basis and the limit of what is possible in reading comprehension. The reader’s first reception of a work necessarily involves an examination of its aesthetic value in relation to what he has read before. For those works that do not directly evoke expectations, Jauss suggests three general ways of building vision. This means that the translators can consciously build up the reader’s horizon of expectation during the translation process.

Appealing Structure

The uncertainty and gaps in the meaning of a work determined by the appealing structure. Iser (1978) suggests that the blank refers to vacancies exists in the whole text, and the fulfillment of the text can nudge the interaction between the textual patterns. The blank needs to be linked to enhance the schemata of the text. Zhu Liyuan (2004) points out that modern readers are opposed to omniscient creative narratives, and are demanding a greater degree of participation like god. To some extent, they want to be a substitute for the writer. Translators can take advantage of gaps and uncertainties in the text to optimize their translations and make them more accessible to reader.

Implied Readers

Iser (1978) suggests that the concept of the implied readers is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him. This concept pre-structures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus, the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to

grasp the text. For the translators, the process of translating the text is also aimed at satisfying the implied readers.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE TRANSLATION OF FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

Based on what has been mentioned above, it is clear that reception aesthetics is a readers-centered theory, which helps translators consider the readers’ reception in the translation process. By comparison of Xiao ZhiTang’s version and Chen Chenghe’s version, this part aims at finding the sameness and differences on lexical level, syntactic level and discourse level respectively. In the following case analyses, ST refers to examples from *Flowers for Algernon*, including the sentences and paragraphs, while TT1 refers to Xiao Zhitang’s version and the TT2 refers to Chen Chenghe’s version.

Lexical Level

Lexis the smallest unit of semantics, a necessary component of phrases and sentences, which is the most fundamental factor that a translator needs to consider. In the translation process, different choices of lexis can directly affect the expression of the message of the original text. If handled improperly, the meaning of the original text can deviate. No word in a good work is superfluous, especially the particular “misspellings” and “retarded” expressions in this science fiction, which present more gaps and uncertainties. It gives the translators more autonomy and is important for the translator to guide the readers to imagine without destroying the images. At the same time, it is important for the readers to see the details in the progress report and to fully understand what is being said in it, which no doubt creates difficulties for the translator. Guided by the theory of reception aesthetics, some examples are selected to demonstrate the acceptability to readers in the two Chinese versions.

The translation of misspelled lexis

Example 1

ST: progress report (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 1)

TT1: 进展报告 (Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 1)

TT2: 近步报告 (Chen Chenghe, 2015, 1)

This example is at the beginning and throughout the fiction. This science fiction is a report of a scientific experiment, and it is recorded in the form of Charlie Gordon’s diary. It is both a part of the experiment and also deals with the trail of Charlie Gordon’s daily life and the emotional changes that occur to him. Therefore, these words recur at the beginning of each progress report to mark it. As the scientific experiment progresses, the writing of these four words change in the original text, and this is the part that the readers first read and perceive. It is impossible to get a glimpse of the whole story, but the readers still understand a tiny fraction of the total language. Here, both Xiao Zhitang’s and Chen’s translations deliberately use the treatment of misspelled words in Chinese instead.

In both versions, the words “进展”and “近步”are used to convey a sense of continuous improvement over the original. However, there is still difference, as Chen’s translation uses the word “近步”to express the meaning of progress and to emphasize the purpose of Charlie Gordon’s participation in the experiment, which improves his reading and writing skills and to become smarter, focusing on Charlie Gordon’s psychological aspirations as an experimenter, with a stronger sense of individuality. The word“进展”is used in the Xiao Zhitang’s version to convey the idea of development, which is a reflection of the attitude that Charlie at this time is more akin to Algernon, existing as an experiment. Here it is more from the point of view of the researchers of this experiment, a rational yet dispassionate view of Charlie Gordon and, of course, a hint of indifference. Although Charlie Gordon writes his“报告” at their request, the difference in translation here shows the difference in attitude of the characters. Furthermore, in Chen’s translation, the wrong Chinese characters are used for both “近”and“抱”. In Xiao’s translation, however, only the wrong character is used for“抱”. The version by Xiao Zhitang is more straightforward, presenting the misspellings and showing the flawed intelligence and learning of Charlie Gordon, while using a misspelling that does not affect readers’ experience as much as possible. Chen’s version splits the progress from the report, as both words in the original appear misspelled, creating a formal counterpoint to the original. In Chinese culture, ancient poetry often adopts rhetorical device of pairing and counterpoint, and the four-character idiom is also concerned with this symmetry, which, on the whole, presents a tendency to pursue formal justice. Thus, the “wrong one separated by one” here is more in line with the expected vision of Chinese reader and is easily accepted by them.

Example 3 - Table 1

ST	TT1	TT2
Algernon—Gordan Effect (2005, 296)	阿尔吉依·高登现象 (2010, 253)	阿尔吉依—高登效应 (2015, 234)
The effects of left-handed goal boxes in a T-maze versus right-handed goal boxes in a T-maze. (2005, 157)	右手目标式T型迷宫对照左手目标式T型迷宫 (2010, 156)	左侧目标盒在T形迷宫的效应, 与右侧目标盒在T形迷宫中的效应比较 (2015, 146)
Phenylketonuria (2005, 147)	PKU症---苯丙酮酸性精神幼稚病 (2010, 146)	苯丙酮尿症 (2015, 136)
Ionizing radiation (2005, 147)	离子化辐射 (2010, 146)	电离辐射 (2015, 136)

In terms of“Algernon-Gordan Effect”, it is translated in two versions as“现象”and“效应”respectively. The term“现象”is more likely to describe the external manifestations of something, while“效应”tends to describe the reactions and effects caused by the development of something. The Xiao’s version better meets the expectations of readers, considering that Charlie Gordon has used the term to draw professional conclusions for himself and Algernon.

In terms of“the effects of left-handed goal boxes in a T-maze versus right-handed goal boxes in a T-maze”, the version by

Example 2

ST: He explained me it was a raw shok test.....I don’t think I passed the raw shok test. (Daniel Keyes,2005, 3)

TT1: 他跟我解释这是一种“原始刺激测验”, 其他学生看得出来里面有图片……我想我大概没通过考试。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 3-4)

TT2: 伯特向我解是说这叫作罗夏测烟……我想我没有通过罗夏测验。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 3)

The word “raw shok test” appears twice here, and Xiao’s translation, it is translated directly as “考试” in an elliptical way. The Rorschach Inkblot Test is a very famous personality test created by the Swiss psychiatrist Rorschach, which projects the personality of the participant by identifying meaningless pictures. It corresponds to the situation described by the author in the original article. For the readers, if they know the test, then the version will be understood by heart. Even if they don’t know it, the readers will skip this. But Xiao’s “原始刺激测验” makes the readers think, “What the hell is this?” Thus, Chen’s translation is more conducive to reader acceptance.

The Translation of Terms

Terms used in the science fiction greatly differs from ordinary those in other texts, which requires the sense of being scientific, colloquial and literary. Although readers are not required to understand the full meaning of these terms, the translation must ensure that the reader can have some understanding of it. The text is acceptable to the reader. Therefore, the terms are difficult in the science fiction translation. A selection of cases from the book is placed here for comparison.

Xiao ZhiTang “右手目标式T型迷宫对照左手目标式T型迷宫” is general and unspecific. But Chen Chenghe has dealt with this term very well and explained it more carefully.

Phenylketonuria originally means “苯丙酮尿症”, but Xiao adds this term“精神幼稚病”to the version. Therefore, even though readers do not know what Phenylketonuria is, they can understand this mental illness according to Charlie’s behavior and this addition. Chen adopts a straightforward approach. Generally speaking, Xiao’s version is in line with readers’ expected vision and effectively fills in the textual gaps.



The term ionizing radiation, which is often understood as “电离辐射”, has already been a fixed expression. In the Xiao’s translation, “离子化辐射” tends to impose the understanding burden on readers. Therefore, Chen’s translation is more appropriate than Xiao’s.

The Translation of Allegorical Lexis

Example 4

ST: I saw the spilled ink and I was very scared even though I got my rabbit’s foot in my pocket because when I was a kid I always feared tests in school and I spilled ink. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 2)

TT1: 我虽然已在口袋里放兔脚, 但还是很害怕, 只看到喷出来的墨汁。我害怕是因为小时候考不好, 常弄翻墨水。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 2)

TT2: 我只看到有墨水到在上面。虽然我的口袋里幸运兔脚我还是很害怕因为我小时后在学校每次考是都失败而且时常打翻墨水。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 2)

In Western culture, the rabbit’s foot represents luck and has the effect of warding off evil spirits. This example describes the process of Charlie taking a test and believing that by wearing the rabbit’s foot he would luckily pass the test. In our culture, there are also items likewise. Both translators have adopted a straightforward translation strategy of dissimulation, which may be confusing to readers who are unaware of cross-cultural differences and of the relationship between “carrying a rabbit’s foot” and “being afraid.” The differences lie in the translation of “幸运兔脚” and “兔脚”. Chen adds the essential function of the rabbit’s foot representing “幸运”, so readers can naturally and easily make a connection between the two words. Thus, “幸运兔脚” is more accessible to readers.

Example 5

ST: It doesn’t matter what he thinks of himself. Surely he’s egotistic, so what? It takes that kind of ego to make a man attempt a thing like this. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 151)

TT1: 他自认为是怎样的人并不重要呀! 他是有点自我中心, 那又怎样? 有时候, 自我中心反而会促使一个人达成像这样的成就。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 150)

TT2: 他如何看待自己并不重要, 他无疑是很自我本位, 但又如何? 一个人要敢于尝试做这种事, 就需要那样的自负。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 140-141)

“自我本位” is an important concept in Natsume Soseki’s thought system, describing a state of mind within the intellectuals in the novel. For general readers, it is somewhat obscure, difficult to understand and confusing, and hardly pinpoints Nim’s character traits, but the version “自我中心” is often used to describe the character flaws for some people, so Xiao’s translation is more accessible to readers.

Syntactic Level

In terms of syntactic level, it involves sentence patterns

and structures. In *Flowers for Algernon* and its two Chinese versions, it focuses on sentences and their overall meaning.

The Translation of “Quote”

Example 6

ST: ABTIFICIALLY-INDUCED INTELLIGENCE DETERIORATES AT A RATE OF TIME DIRECTIY PROPORTIONAL TO THE QUANTITY OF THE INCREASE. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 255)

TT1: 人工刺激发展的智力会以其增加的速度相对渐渐消退。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 254)

TT2: 人工导入智能衰减的速度, 与增强的分量直接成正比。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 235)

This quote is the result of research presented by Charlie. As a study, it shows that his conclusions would not be too arbitrary, and the use of capital letters increases the difficulty, but it is in a way that readers can understand, so it isn’t too complex. Xiao’s version, without commas and with more complex phrases, is less easily understood. Chen’s version, on the other hand, explains this conclusion by using commas and a proportional mathematical relationship, is more in line with the readers’ expected vision.

The Translation of Sentences

Example 7

ST: I remember that she was always fluttering like a big, white bird around my father, and he was too heavy and tired to escape her pecking. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 72)

TT1: 我记得妈妈总像一只白色的大鸟在爸身旁到处飞来飞去。爸因为身材笨重, 也懒得去理她, 任由她在他身上乱抓。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 74)

TT2: 我记得她像只白色大鸟, 一直拍着翅膀围在我父亲四周, 而他则是太过笨重与疲倦, 根本避不开她的扑啄。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 69)

At this time, Charlie’s IQ reached its peak and his way of speaking was different from before. Chen took full advantage of this shift to make his translation more literary and poetic, while Xiao’s version is more light-hearted and childlike. Although both styles are possible, readers must have more aesthetic expectations such as the rhetorical device of metaphor. Therefore, Chen’s version is more acceptable.

Example 8

ST: And they put the evil eye on him. They called it the I.Q., but it was the evil I.Q. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 266)

TT1: 有个男孩, 但因为太优秀了, 其他母亲都妒忌他, 她们用恶魔的眼光看他, 说他很有I.Q., 却是恶魔的I.Q.。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 265)

TT2: 我还有个男孩。他聪明到让所有母亲嫉妒, 她们在他身上放了凶眼, 他们叫它I.Q., 但那是邪恶的I.Q.。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 245)

In Xiao's version, the translation of evil eye as “恶魔的眼光” is a good way with using very specific imagery to make readers vicariously involved. The phrase “在他身上放了凶眼” is translated directly, while the phrase “用恶魔的眼光看他” is translated freely, which is a good way to adjust the structure of the sentence. In Chen's version, although “凶眼” is a direct translation, it is difficult for readers to understand. And readers may think it is a kind of machine, thus misinterpreting the text. At the same time, “恶魔的眼光” is more likely to mean “嫉妒” rather than “邪恶的眼光”. Therefore, Xiao's version here is more accessible to readers.

Discourse Level

Translation at the level of discourse from the perspective of receptive aesthetics should focus on articulation and coherence of the discourse, ensuring that sentences are logically connected to minimize readers' barriers for reading and understanding. Particularly in this science fiction, the establishment of Charlie's image is largely based on the expression of words. Readers can certainly judge his literacy by the errors in writing, but they cannot directly equate the spelling of words and the use of vocabulary with his intelligence. What readers judge is mainly by the paragraphs of words and the discourse. For example, if a child speaks or writes, people think he or she is a child mainly because they find the childishness in spoken and written languages.

The Translation of Nursery Rhyme

Nursery rhymes are generally short in length and down-to-earth in content. The expressions used in the translation of nursery rhymes should be lively and easy to understand, so that readers can easily feel the childlike interest in the text. In terms of content and form, the rhymes should be close to the readers' psyche. Here is the comparison based on the versions by Xiao Zhitang and Chen Chenghe.

Example 9

ST: Three blind mice... three blind mice,

See how they run! See how they run!

They all run after the farmer's wife,

She cut off their tails with a carving knife,

Did you ever see such a sight in your life,

As three...blind...mice? (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 277)

TT1: 三只瞎老鼠.....三只瞎老鼠,

跑得跌跌撞撞, 跌跌撞撞,

还追着农夫老婆身后跑,

终于被她用尖刀割掉尾巴,

这可是一辈子难得一见,

三只.....瞎.....老鼠? (Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 275)

TT2: 三只瞎眼的老鼠.....三只瞎眼的老鼠,

看它们跑得多么快! 看它们跑得多么快!

它们都在追赶农夫的太太,

她用切肉刀切掉它们的尾巴,

你可曾见过这样的景象,

三只.....瞎眼的.....老鼠? (Chen Chenghe, 2015, 255)

Based on the plot of the science fiction, this nursery rhyme was heard in Charlie Gordon's childhood. And he could sing it, so it has a strong musical quality. “瞎老鼠” is more concise than “瞎眼的老鼠” and more closely resembles the character of the nursery rhyme. In Xiao's version, the phrase “跌跌撞撞” has a rhythmic sense and reads smoothly, easily reminding readers of the comical image of the three blind mice running around. In Chen's version, the phrase “跑得多么快” is a mere exclamation, lacking the vitality of a nursery rhyme. The phrase “尖刀” is funnier than the phrase “切肉刀”, and the lyric “这可是一辈子难得一见” is a light-hearted way of expressing the atmosphere of watching the fun. However, the phrase “你可曾见过这样的景象” is treated rather stiltedly. Xiao's version seems more positive and lively, while Chen's is more elegant and neat. To sum up, Xiao Zhitang's version captures the character of the nursery rhyme and is easily acceptable to readers.

The Translation of Textual Description

Example 10

ST: He said what does it remind you of pretending it's something. I closed my eyes for a long time to pretend and then I said I pretend a bond of ink spilled all over a white card. And that is when the point on his pencil broke and then we got up and went out. (Daniel Keyes, 2005, 3)

TT1: 只是叫我想象里面有东西。我说有啊, 我想象里面有墨点。他摇头说, 也不是这样, 要我假装里面有东西。我闭上眼睛想了很久告诉他说, 有人笔尖破了, 把整瓶墨水弄翻在这些卡片上。考完后, 我们一起站起来走出房间。(Xiao Zhitang, 2010, 4)

TT2: 只说要去想象有东西在卡片上。我说我想象到一个墨水图。但他摇头所以我还是说的不对。他说假装那是个东西问我会联想到什么。我闭上眼睛很久假装在想然后我说这是一瓶墨水打翻在白色的卡片上。听到这些话时他的铅笔尖断掉了。我们就站起来走出去。(Chen Chenghe, 2015, 3)

There is a very wide gap in the fiction. Chen's version still focuses on the wrong words, maintains a childish style of language and presents a childlike innocence in the way it is spoken. “一瓶墨水打翻在白色的卡片”, such spilled ink scenes are not uncommon in primary school classrooms, easily summons up the readers' childhood memories, creating a sense of familiarity and intimacy that is better received by the target audience and resonates emotionally with Charlie Gordon. In Xiao's version, a logical confusion is created. The sentence “有人笔尖破了, 把整瓶墨水弄翻在

这些卡片上” becomes an imaginary scene in Xiao’s version. Although the blankness of the basic text can barely explain this, it is still confusing for readers.

CONCLUSION

Guided by the theory of reception aesthetics, the paper makes a comparison of two Chinese versions of *Flowers for Algernon* and explores the translation strategies and characteristics of this science fiction. It is very important that a translation work should be easy for readers to understand and then accept. A readers-oriented translation is designed for readers to better understand and feel the text rather than to please readers. The translator needs to protect the literary quality of the original text and its style, and undertakes the translating job according to readers’ expectations.

FUNDING

This paper is supported by 2019 Discipline Construction Project from Leshan Normal University “Research on Narrative Reconstruction in Translation and International Communication of China’s Science Fiction – A Case Study of *Santi* Translated by Ken Liu”(WZD026) , and 2023 MTI Discipline Construction Project from Leshan Normal University “Research on Integration Mechanism of Translation Discipline, Major and Course in Ideological and Political Education” (2023SSPYFY001).

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Citation: Lin Wang, “A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of Science Fiction Flowers for Algernon from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics”, *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, Vol 9, no. 1, 2023, pp. 122-127.

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